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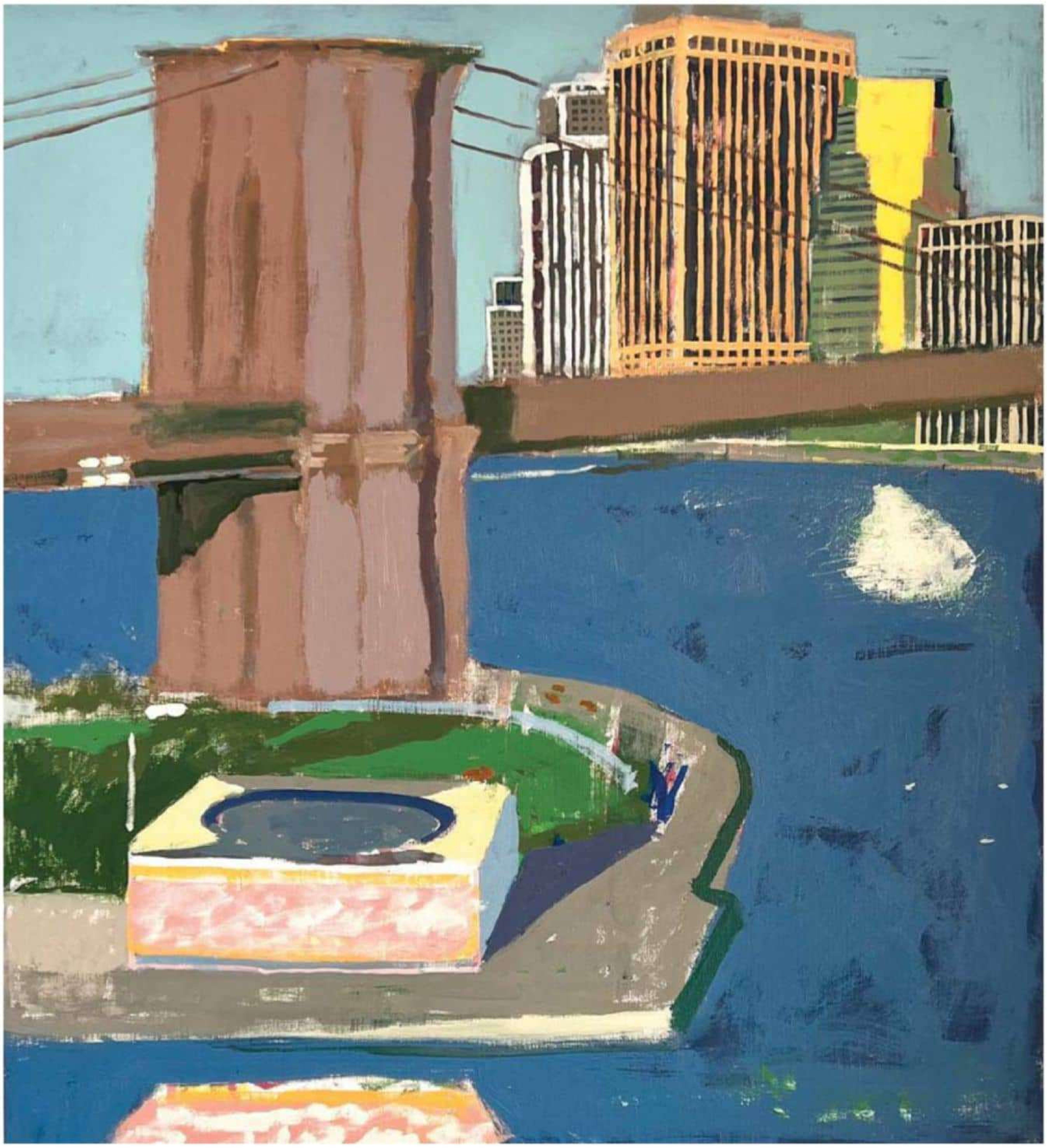
THE NEW YORKER

JAN. 22, 2024

Mitchell Johnson

Flea Street, Menlo Park / January–February 2024

Musée de la Villa les Camélias, Cap d'Ail / May 17–September 29, 2024



Brooklyn Bridge (Sunrise), 2023, 27 x 24 inches, oil on canvas. © 2024 Mitchell Johnson.

"In sharp contrast, Johnson's paintings convey what I would call the serenity of self-possession—the calm of mature self-certainty. Where Cezanne was a proto-modernist, making representational works that were implicitly abstract, Johnson is a post-modernist, making abstract works that are implicitly—often explicitly—representational. He is a master of both modes, seamlessly integrating them to memorable effect, for memory at its most insistent is an abstract representation—an aesthetic epiphany." —Donald Kuspit, *Whitehot Magazine*

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Gregory Pardlo (*Poem, p. 33*), a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, is a visiting professor of creative writing at N.Y.U. Abu Dhabi. His new book is "Spectral Evidence."

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ANNALS OF INQUIRY
Dan Rockmore writes about the challenges of imposing mathematical models on an unruly world.

ANNALS OF COMMUNICATIONS
Clare Malone on a reporter's struggle to cover the Israel-Hamas war.

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LEFT: PETRA PÉTERFFY; RIGHT: MOHAMMED TALATENE / DPA / AP

THE MAIL

DOES THE PUNISHMENT FIT?

In Sarah Stillman's recent story, she describes America's draconian use of what has become known as the "felony-murder rule," in which any participant in a crime committed as a group—for instance, a robbery—can be prosecuted for any death that occurs while the crime is being carried out ("What Makes a Murder?," December 18th). Her piece takes up the case of Sadik Baxter, who set out to steal from some parked cars with a friend and was promptly arrested. His friend fled the scene in a vehicle, ran a red light, and killed two cyclists. Even though Baxter couldn't have been expected to foresee these two deaths as an outcome of his theft, he was charged with and convicted of first-degree murder. He's now serving a life sentence without parole.

The felony-murder rule has a place in criminal jurisprudence: armed participants in, say, a bank robbery typically understand that a death may ensue from their actions. In such cases, it makes sense that all are held accountable. But, in cases like Baxter's, it's clear that prosecutors are failing to uphold the ethical standards of their profession; it is the duty of a prosecutor not to convict but to insure justice. Prosecutors have a degree of discretion in how they file charges, and they should refrain from using the felony-murder rule in cases where a reasonable person couldn't foresee the death of a human being as an outcome of the criminal activity.

John Polifka
Mapleton, Iowa

Stillman writes that after the U.K. abolished felony murder, in 1957, most other Commonwealth nations followed suit. A notable exception is Australia, in which statutory variations of felony murder—often referred to as "constructive murder"—exist in all six states. These variations tend to limit the application of the old common-law rule by specifying the nature and gravity of the base offense, but a troublesome infidelity to the principle of subjective fault remains—as does the imposition of disproportionate sentences that have no discernible deterrent effect.

Stephanie Classmann
London, U.K.

AU CONTRAIRE

In Natan Last's delightful and illuminating essay on the ways that crossword puzzles reflect—or fail to reflect—the experiences of those who solve them, he touches on a tension that crossword constructors understand all too well ("Rearrangements," December 25th). No two solvers share the same knowledge or vocabulary, yet, as this magazine's puzzles-and-games editor, Liz Maynes-Aminzade, has noted, those who prepare crossword puzzles inevitably rely on a belief in some kind of canon or common culture. Last cites an analysis by Charles Kurzman and Josh Katz, from 2016, that found that the modern *Times* crossword makes substantially less use of international references and languages other than English than it once did. Kurzman and Katz interpret this trend as evidence of increasing parochialism. In fact, it may be a sign that the *Times* crossword has become more inclusive. The decline in non-English clues and answers is driven largely by the waning presence of French and Latin, two languages that Americans primarily encounter in the rarefied spaces of academia. A shift away from foreign languages could well be part of an effort to make the crossword accessible to a broader audience, a mission that Will Shortz, the *Times* crossword editor since 1993, has long championed.

Jack Maurer
Huntsville, Ala.

•

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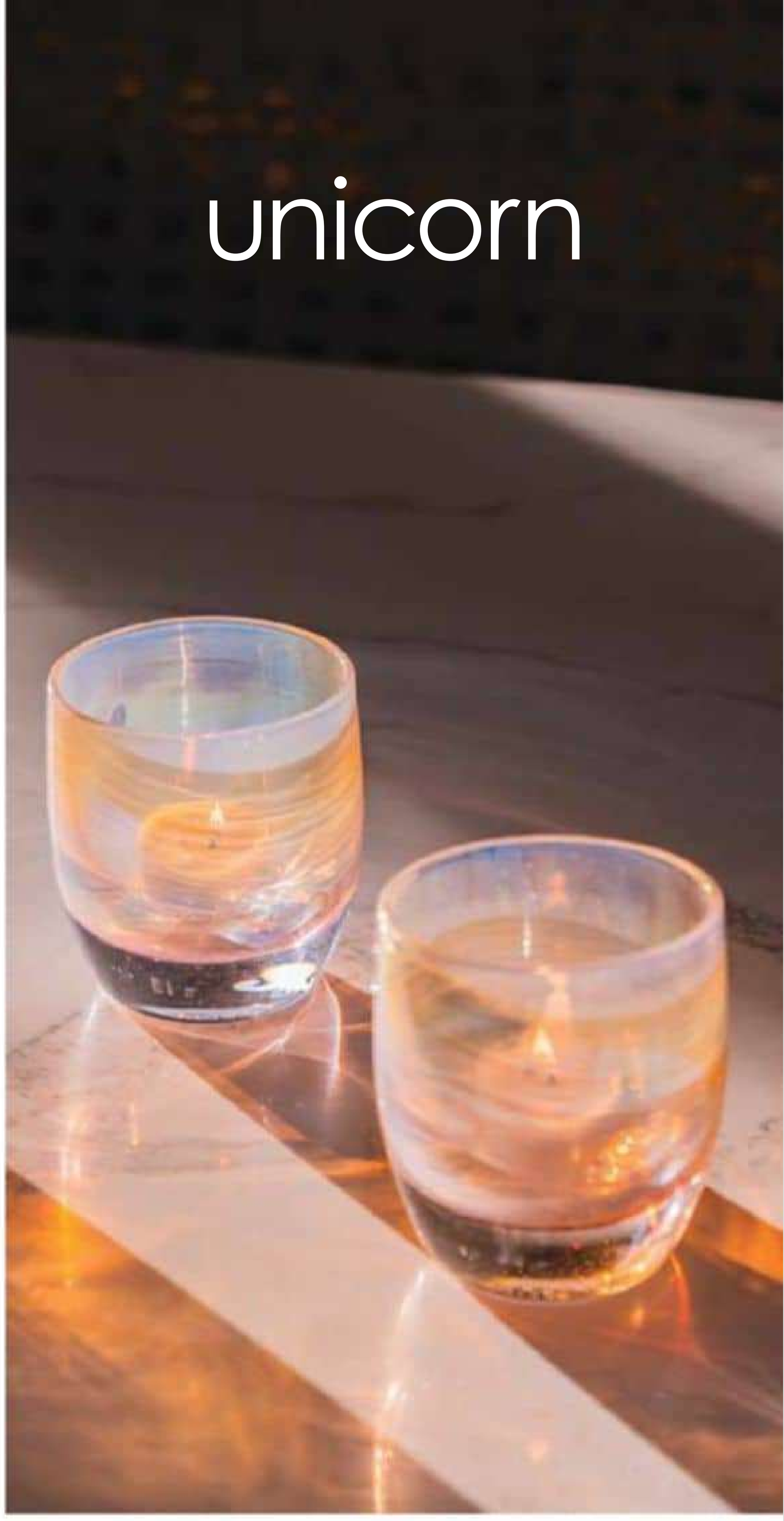

beauty, honesty,
and deep strength, to boot?
I used to think that was
too good to be true.
but ever since I have
come to know you,
I think I could believe in
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GOINGS ON

JANUARY 17 – 23, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

Among the accomplishments of the intrepid pianist and composer **Ryuichi Sakamoto**—who died in March of last year, at the age of seventy-one—was his work with Yellow Magic Orchestra, in the late seventies and early eighties, which greatly influenced electronic music and hip-hop. His curious solo pursuits spanned pop and ambient, the worldly and the avant-garde; his film scores earned him an Oscar, a BAFTA, and a Grammy. As the 2024 Winter Jazzfest comes to a close, the artist's life and legacy are commemorated in a concert, at Roulette on Jan. 17, featuring the Sakamoto Tribute Ensemble, DJ Spooky, and the experimental performer Yuka C. Honda, along with special guests, raising funds for the Trees for Sakamoto foundation.—*Sheldon Pearce*

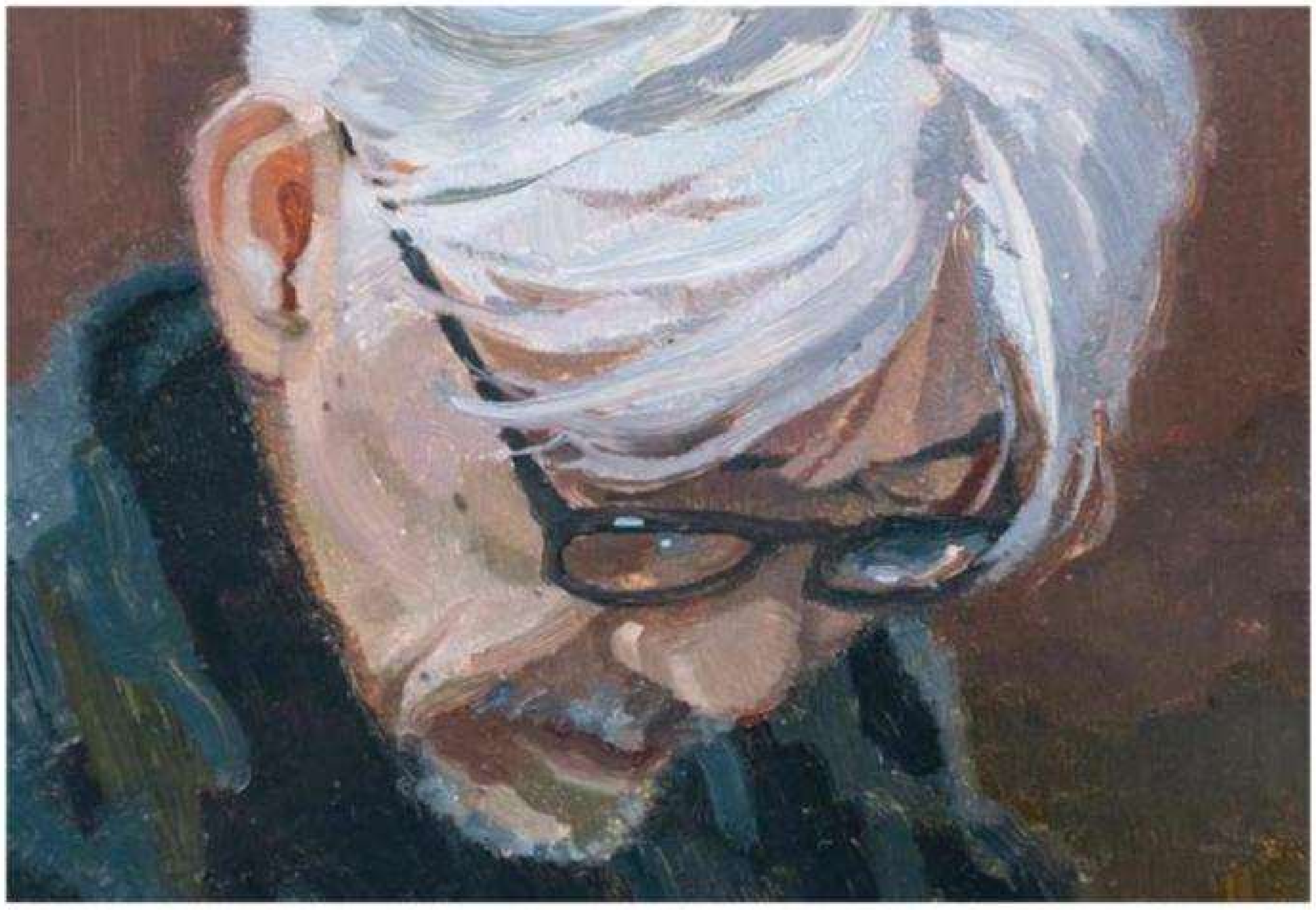


ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES LEE CHIAHAN

ABOUT TOWN

TELEVISION | History is an oppressive force in **"Fellow Travelers,"** but, miraculously, Showtime's eight-part adaptation of Thomas Mallon's novel seldom gets bogged down in tragedy. Sensual and heartfelt, the show traces the thirty-odd-year relationship between two men (Matt Bomer and Jonathan Bailey) who first meet in the fifties during Joseph McCarthy's Lavender Scare, when the far-right senator sought to purge not just Communists but gay men and women from government service. Bailey, in particular, lends a winsome unpredictability to the period romance, which is most interested in exploring how these characters respond to the historical circumstances—and, gradually, social progress—that arrive just in time for some, and much too late for others.—*Inkoo Kang (Reviewed in our issue of 11/6/23.) (Streaming on Paramount+.)*

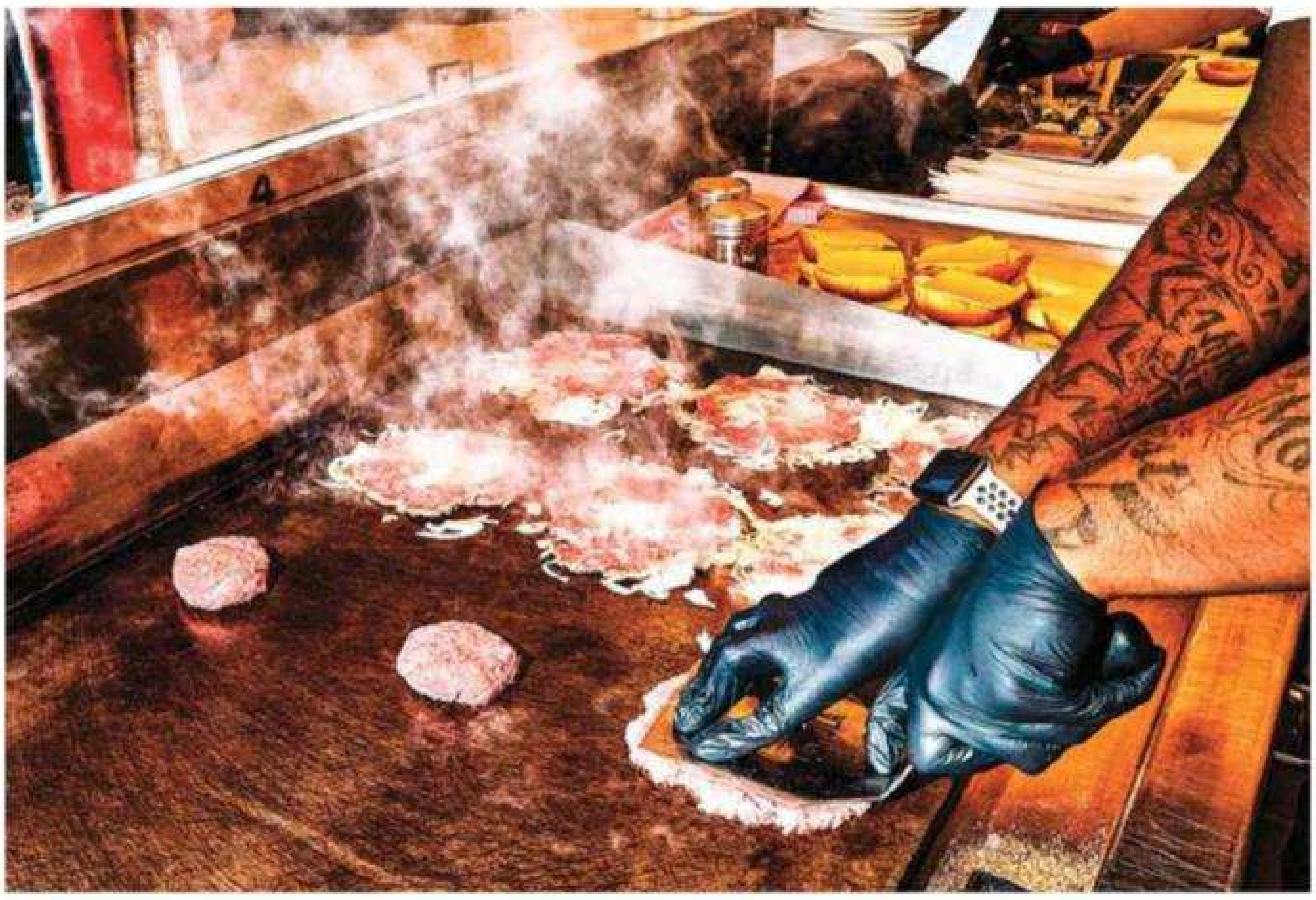
CLASSICAL MUSIC | Kurt Weill's theatre music is more or less synonymous with Germany's unstable interwar years, but Carnegie Hall has set itself the task of seeing beyond one composer's disenchanted, slinkily soulful style in the season-long festival "Fall of the Weimar Republic: Dancing on the Precipice." Franz Welser-Möst conducts the **Cleveland Orchestra,** one of the country's best, in two concerts (Jan. 20-21); of special note are pieces by Ernst Krenek and Anton Webern, whose elusive, atonal music was deemed "degenerate" art by the Nazis. Two days later, the Philadelphia Orchestra, led by Yannick Nézet-Séguin, broadens the impression of Weill as a composer of darkly satirical stage works, with his elegantly airborne Symphony No. 2 (Jan. 23).—*Oussama Zahr (Carnegie Hall.)*

DANCE | In recent years, many choreographers have been presenting their works as acts of healing. **Ronald K. Brown** has been doing something similar since he founded his company, Evidence, nearly forty years ago. But, where much of today's trendy work is self-involved, Brown's dances bring succor to the audience. The means are musical and kinesthetic, an irresistible blend of African and American modern dance that lifts the spirit. A good example is his 2001 work "Walking Out the Dark," the centerpiece of his current season. Two couples face off in bodily arguments, get showered in dust, then find reconciliation, as the music traces a path from the American South to Cuba to Africa. It's diaspora in reverse.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Jan. 16-20.)*

SOUL | The soul duo **Black Pumas** surfaced out of nowhere when it scored a surprise Grammy nomination for Best New Artist in 2020, and then, a year later, crashed the Record and Album of the Year categories. Its odd-couple members—Eric Burton and Adrian Quesada—have a provincial origin story: seeking a singer, Quesada put out feelers for talent in Austin, turning up the unknown Burton, and they worked out their material weekly at a local bar. Fittingly, their stirring, ageless music sounds juke-joint-tested and stage-ready, tender yet massive. The duo is joined by the reunited nineties jazz-rap outfit Digable Planets, which shares its affinity for dusting off vintage sounds.—*Sheldon Pearce (Radio City Music Hall; Jan. 19.)*

MOVIES | In this season of one-word-title biopics, Ava DuVernay's **"Origin"** stands out for its innovation and audacity. It dramatizes how the journalist Isabel Wilkerson (Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor), motivated both by grief in her private life and by public tragedies (particularly the killing of Trayvon Martin), wrote her acclaimed 2020 book, "Caste." Wilkerson's study traces thematic connections between various forms of persecution—including the enslavement of Black people in the U.S., the oppression of Dalit people in India, and the deportation and murder of Jews in Nazi Germany—and DuVernay pays rapt attention to the author's intellectual labor. Displaying the personal dramas arising in the course of Wilkerson's international journeys and depicting historical events detailed in her work, DuVernay's complex blend of fiction and documentary, theory and experience, is deft and thrilling.—*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*

OFF OFF BROADWAY | In show after show, Julia Mounsey and Peter Mills Weiss create simple masterpieces of dread; they murmur seemingly true horror stories, which wriggle into our minds like worms into soil. Their latest, part of the Under the Radar festival, the surprising and heartfelt **"Open Mic Night,"** however, implants something far more dangerous: grief. As a way of paying tribute to their recently shuttered D.I.Y. performance space, Life World, the deadpan Mills Weiss re-creates a (putative, hilariously terrible) crowd-work standup routine—he offered one theatregoer "a choice between two continuums or a binary"—as Mounsey gives live critique. The audience laughs, but eventually we realize that we're participating in a wake for a theatre. The two chief mourners barely register us. For them, we become another sound effect, there to approximate, for a moment, the sound of a vanished room.—*Helen Shaw (Performance Space New York; through Jan. 18.)*



TABLES FOR TWO

Hamburger America

51 MacDougal St.

When George Motz, possibly our greatest scholar of hamburgers, announced last year that he would be opening a burger joint of his very own, New York's center of gravity shifted—subtly, but perceptibly—toward a red brick building on the corner of MacDougal and Houston, in Soho, where he had signed a lease. The restaurant, which opened in November, has been kitted out with chrome and Formica, a retro fantasia bearing the same grand, unifying, hand-on-heart name, and ethos, as Motz's first film and first book: Hamburger America.

There are just two burgers on the menu at Hamburger America. The Classic Smash—in which a baseball of freshly ground beef is smeared into lace-edged flatness on a searing-hot griddle—can be ordered "all dressed," with melty American cheese, diced onion, a few dill-pickle rounds, and a slash of mustard. The signature George Motz's Fried Onion Burger uses an Oklahoma technique of covering the beef with a heap of sweet onions, sliced paper-thin; after flipping, the onions caramelize and char and all but disappear into the meat, giving the patty a haunting sweetness. It's served with just a slice of American cheese, both lubrication and salt. The burgers are on the smaller side, and are available with double patties, though it seems foolish to disturb the perfection of the single-patty ratio. Despite all the fanfare, the onion burger is a little bland, but the Classic Smash is fantastic, with a balance and harmony that's strong and correct. You don't need to know the history of burgers to be taken with its honest flavors, its modest size, its firm handshake of pickle and onion and good ol' American ground beef. It's a hamburger you trust, a hamburger that you'd feel good about taking your daughter to prom.

Hamburger America also offers fries (thin and crisp) and simple sandwiches (creamy egg and tuna salads; grilled cheese; a deeply satisfying P. B. & J.), and a secret, off-menu sandwich that I've seen described elsewhere, inaccurately, as a patty melt. In fact, it's a grilled cheese with a smash-burger patty inside it, and it's singularly terrific. There's a milk menu, your choice of plain, chocolate, or coffee (a Rhode Island specialty, made with Autocrat-brand coffee syrup, sweet and bitter); the latter two can be topped with seltzer for a very decent egg cream. The best seats in the house are at the counter—especially those right in front of the burger station, where Motz himself, tall and mutton-chopped, is likely to be captaining the griddle, a whack-a-mole of patties in various stages of historically accurate smash. "This is the way burgers were made in America at the very beginning," he writes in "The Great American Burger Book." "The progenitor of every burger we have ever seen, made, or tasted." *(Burgers and sandwiches $5-$11.50.)*

—*Helen Rosner*

PICK THREE

The staff writer Richard Brody shares current obsessions.

1. Francis Ford Coppola, now eighty-four, is everywhere, with the upcoming reëdited rerelease of his 1981 musical, "One from the Heart" (in theatres Jan. 19), and in anticipation of his self-financed science-fiction feature, "Megalopolis," out sometime this year. There's also a notable new book, **"The Path to Paradise,"** by Sam Wasson, that relies on the filmmaker's archives and hundreds of interviews to form a meticulous portrait of a daring artist who risked his career to establish a studio of his own.

2. The 1953 performance in Toronto of a quintet headed by the saxophonist Charlie Parker and the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie was released in 1973 as "The Greatest Jazz Concert Ever." Its new reissue, **"Hot House,"** is revelatory. The restoration makes the high-flying horn solos stand out all the more clearly and—by exposing the synergy of the rhythm section, the bassist Charles Mingus, the pianist Bud Powell, and the drummer Max Roach—renders the music irresistibly, danceably propulsive.

3. "Age of Panic," the first feature by Justine Triet ("Anatomy of a Fall"), from 2013, is a freewheeling blend of fiction and documentary, set on the day of France's 2012 Presidential runoff. Laetitia (Laetitia Dosch), a TV news reporter and a single mother in the midst of a visitation battle, is sent to cover the rally of the real-life Socialist candidate François Hollande. Triet, who filmed at the actual rally, combines the drama of a working woman's personal crises with an incisive view of media-driven politics. Now streaming on MUBI, it's one of the wildest, most original recent French movies.

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THE NEW YORKER

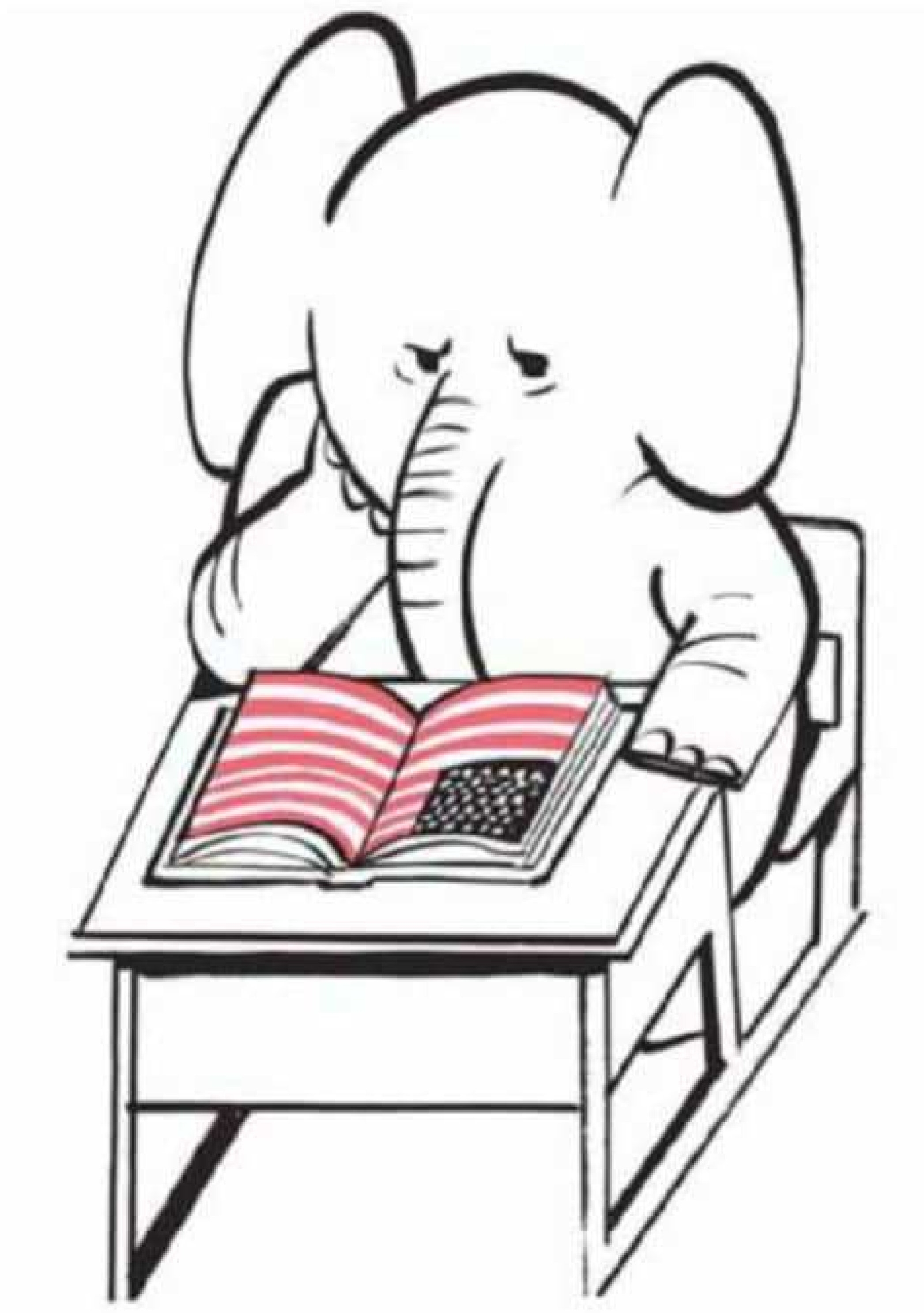
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
REPUBLICANS NOW AND THEN

The race for the 2024 Republican Presidential nomination has so far been notable mostly for the candidates' sniping, hyperbole, and self-righteous indignation, but there has been a shared concern for the prospects of the twenty-first century. In a barb seemingly aimed at both Joe Biden and Donald Trump, Nikki Haley said, “We won't win the fight for the twenty-first century if we keep trusting politicians from the twentieth century.” Vivek Ramaswamy, whose fealty to Trump is nearly clerical, hailed him as “the best President of the twenty-first century,” even though Trump leads the three other men elected since 2000 in impeachments by a score of two to zero. Ron DeSantis posted on X, “The 21st century needs to be an American century. We cannot let it be a Chinese century.” It's ironic, then, that so much time in this heated stretch of the contest has been devoted to issues that defined the nineteenth century.

Trump recently assured a crowd in Mason City, Iowa, that Haley “doesn't have what it takes.” He cited her meandering answer to a question about the cause of the Civil War, from an audience member at a New Hampshire town hall, in which she failed to even mention slavery. With typical self-satisfaction, Trump noted, “I'd say ‘slavery’ is sort of the obvious answer, as opposed to about three paragraphs of bullshit.”

This particular problem with the past is not a new one for today's Republicans. Governor DeSantis called Haley's reply an “incomprehensible word salad,” and said it wasn't that difficult to identify “the role slavery played”—yet he has faced criticism for Florida's new public-school standards, which suggest that some Black people benefitted from the institution. (DeSantis majored in history at Yale and briefly taught the subject at a private high school in Georgia; according to the *Times*, he “got into debates about the Civil War with students who questioned the focus, and sometimes the accuracy, of his lessons.”) Chris Christie accused Haley of being “unwilling to offend anyone by telling the truth,” and mocked her error again last week, in a speech announcing the suspension of his campaign. Ramaswamy offered the most complete response, pointing to the sectional and political tensions that had existed for decades prior to 1861 before noting that, without slavery, none of them was sufficient to ignite the maelstrom of civil war. Previously, however, he had espoused the discredited theory that the Second Amendment secured the freedom of former slaves (by allowing them to defend it with guns) and deemed Juneteenth a “useless” holiday.



Haley, meanwhile, quickly acknowledged that slavery was, of course, the war's central cause. In fact, in South Carolina's 1860 Declaration of Secession, legislators said that their decision was the result of “an increasing hostility on the part of non-slaveholding States to the institution of slavery.” And Haley herself, as South Carolina's governor, had the Confederate flag removed from the grounds of the state capitol in 2015, after a white supremacist murdered nine African Americans as they prayed in Charleston's Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church.

Last Monday, President Biden gave an impassioned speech at that church, where he praised not Haley but the congregation for bringing down the flag, through its profound act of forgiveness, which had “changed hearts.” He also reiterated that the defeated Confederates had embraced “a self-serving lie that the Civil War was not about slavery but about states' rights,” and decried current efforts to “erase” history. He went on to denounce those Trump supporters who are fixated on a “second lost cause,” manifested in the insurrectionist assault of January 6, 2021—a reminder that slavery is not the only element of nineteenth-century politics to have resurfaced as a matter open to debate.

Earlier this month, the Supreme Court agreed to review whether, under Section 3 of the Fourteenth Amendment, Colorado's Supreme Court is justified in barring Trump from appearing

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

on the ballot in that state's Republican primary, on the basis of his actions related to January 6th. In December, the state's Supreme Court found that it is, but put its ruling on hold to give the higher court time to weigh in. Section 3 prohibits the holding of office by anyone who has taken an oath to support the Constitution but "engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same." Shenna Bellows, the Maine secretary of state, came to the same conclusion as the majority on the Colorado court, and barred Trump's name from appearing on ballots in her state. More than a dozen other states are considering similar actions; oral arguments in the Colorado case will be heard on February 8th.

The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, is, like the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, a product of the period when the Republican Party was fixated on preventing another disastrous insurrection like the one that had just cost some seven hundred thousand lives. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in most circumstances. The Fifteenth Amendment enfranchised Black men, implicitly creating a bloc of voters to counterbalance the power of former Confederates in the South. Section 3 of the Fourteenth makes explicit the Republicans' concerns about the potential threat posed by former insurrectionists.

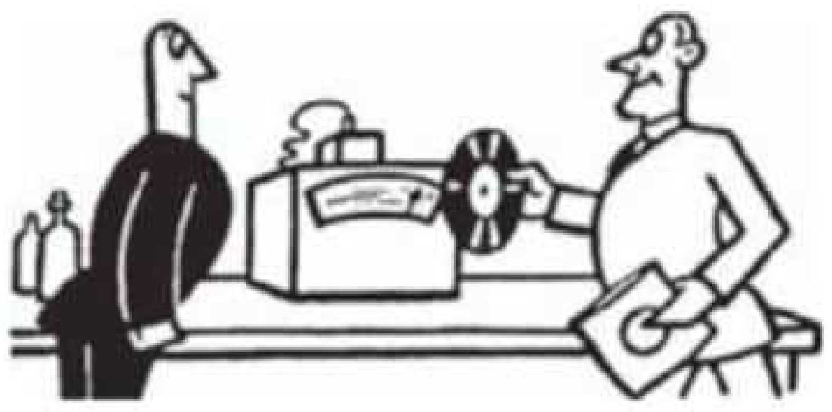
The third anniversary of January 6th fell in the same week that Trump's lawyers made their bid to have the Supreme Court keep him on the Colorado ballot. Their argument holds that the state Supreme Court's ruling will "unconstitutionally disenfranchise millions of voters." It's a rich objection, given that Trump is contesting a racketeering indictment in Georgia for, in essence, attempting to do exactly that. Had his efforts to get Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to "find" him nearly twelve thousand votes been successful, Trump would have disenfranchised nearly two and a half million Georgians who had cast their ballots for Biden.

Nonetheless, Haley, DeSantis, and Ramaswamy all said in recent weeks that, if elected, they would pardon Trump if he is convicted of any of the federal felony charges he is fighting—including those related to January 6th. This suggests that, for all the controversy surrounding the answer, the audience member in New Hampshire may have asked the wrong question. The pertinent issue now is not what caused the Civil War but what we should have learned from it. January 6, 2021, is not an equivalent date in our history to April 12, 1861, but the radical Republican leaders who lived through the Civil War understood a principle that has been lost on their successors: that, if entrusted with power, leaders who commit assaults on the national government once may well attempt to do so again.

—*Jelani Cobb*

INK

DO IT YOURSELF, BABY



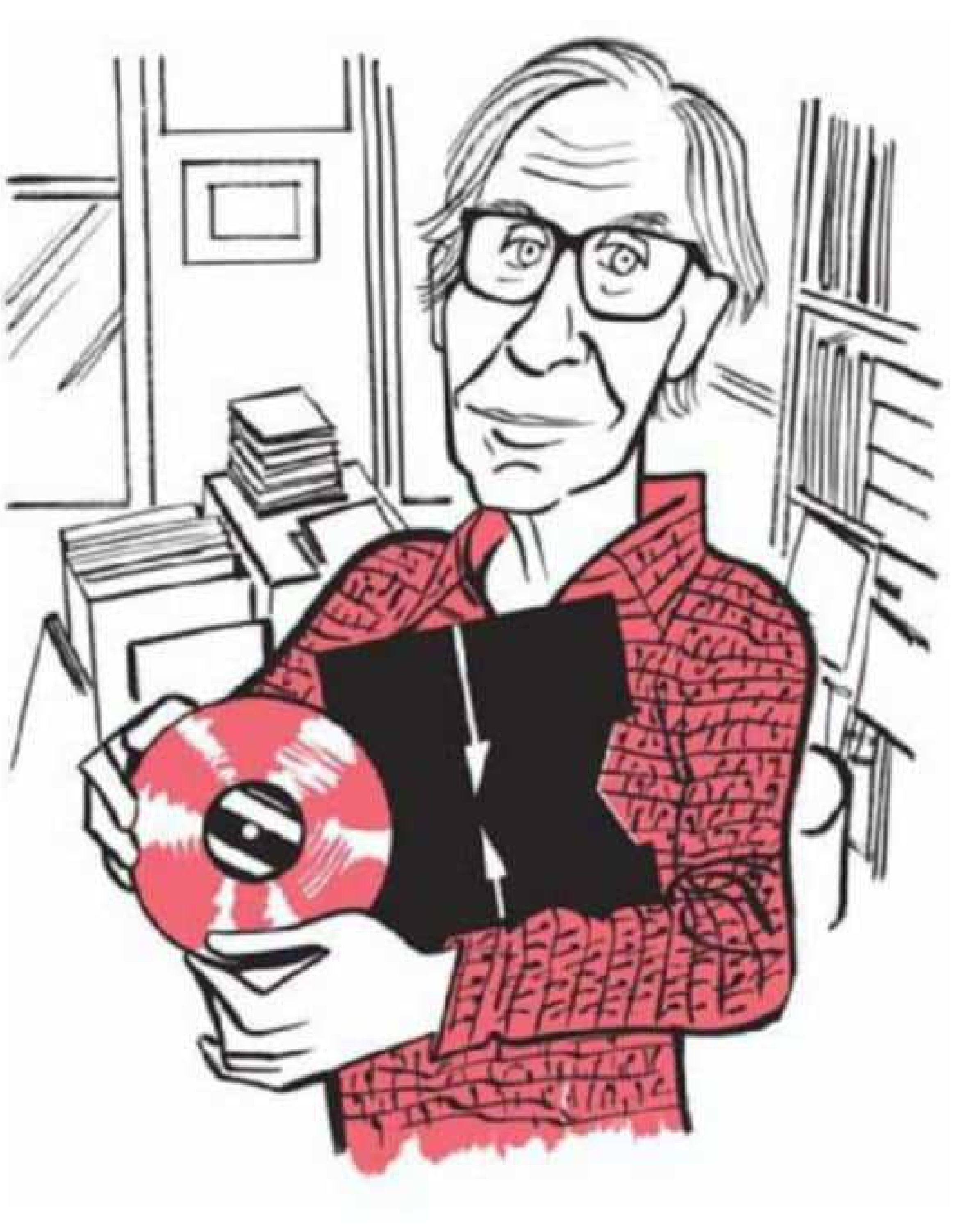
In 1974, Ira Robbins was nineteen years old and pursuing a degree in electrical engineering at Brooklyn Polytechnic, because he wanted both to be a radio engineer and to avoid having to read or write in school. But, as an obsessed and information-starved fan of a bunch of then underappreciated British rock bands, he got the itch to launch a fanzine. His father, an old lefty, had a mimeograph machine at the family's Upper West Side apartment, and Robbins and some friends used it to produce about three hundred copies, twenty-four hand-stapled pages each, of a publication he christened *Trans-Oceanic Trouser Press*, after a 1968 song by the Bonzo Dog Band: "Do the trouser press, baby!" They hawked them outside a Rory Gallagher show at the Academy of Music, for a quarter a pop. With their pockets full of change, they decided to do it again. There would be writing.

Trouser Press, as it came to be called, soon became a scrappy yet integral vehicle for the incursion on these shores of Brit genres, like prog and New Wave, that the critics and radio programmers initially snubbed. For a while, he worked part time, too, at a microphone-importing company ("I was cleaning spit out of Stevie Wonder's microphone, basically," he said the other day), but by 1978 *Trouser Press* was his main gig, with a midtown office and a salary of twelve thousand a year. He also began producing exhaustive record guides, compiling capsule reviews of every album in the New Wave firmament. (The final record guide came out in 1997. Enter Internet.) The magazine's run, meanwhile, lasted a decade. In 1984, amid the stress of a divorce and the arrival of MTV ("We were writing about those bands but didn't love them"), he threw a party at Irving Plaza, with the Del-Lords, Jason and the Scorchers, and the Planets, then stopped publishing. "The minute we went out of business, we heard about how everyone loved us," he said. *Rolling Stone*, in an uncondescending farewell, credited Robbins and his colleagues with the creation of "something as undeniably romantic as a pop-rock underground."

The other day, Robbins, now on the verge of seventy, was in the basement of his Park Slope brownstone, encaved by his music collection: shelves holding more than thirty thousand records, almost a third of them vinyl LPs. Here and there on the walls were old *Trouser Press* covers and correspondence.

"That's a letter from Joan Jett telling me to go fuck myself," he said. He had dissed her guitar playing. Jett's response read, in part, "I guess that puts me in the company of Brian Jones, John Lennon, Greg Kihn, and Bruce Springsteen. Thanks!"

There were letters from Pete Townshend ("Nearly 24 things you should



Ira Robbins

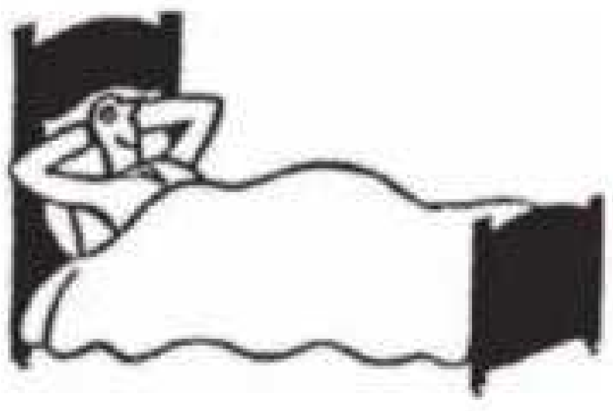
know about the Oo") and Peter Wolf ("I know at times you probably wanted to hit me over the head with a big hammer"), and a *Trouser Press* gag lampooning a famous *National Lampoon* cover: "Buy this kitten, or we'll kill this rock star." Next to it was a note from the rock star in question, Patti Smith: "Ira ☆ I bought the kitten myself."

In his office upstairs, Robbins had a vintage Oxford trouser press leaning against a box of Velvet Underground CDs. On his desktop, he opened a database of all the live gigs that he has ever attended. There was a time when he would see two hundred a year. He took it seriously. "I've never done drugs," he said. In the nineties, as the pop-music editor at New York *Newsday*, he cranked out reviews and features. When he was hired, the paper made him take a drug test. "I didn't know whether I was meant to pass it or fail it," he said.

Robbins has been planning a party at Bowery Electric, in March, for a fiftieth-anniversary compilation titled "The Best of the Trouser Press," which he hopes will also draw attention to his recent resuscitation of the name, as a small imprint called Trouser Press Books. "It's self-publishing, with a little cachet," he said. Stranded at home during the pandemic, having just retired from a job in syndicated radio news, he found that his labors became retrospective. "I have the mind of an accountant," he said. "I inventoried my record collection, and then I did an anthology of my writing." The anthology, "Music in a Word," fills a thousand pages and three volumes. He had already self-published two novels: "Kick It Till It Breaks," a satire of sixties radicals ("I was part of an organization I don't want to talk about. It was Black Panthers-adjacent"), and then "Marc Bolan Killed in Crash," about a teenage girl in glam-era London. ("That didn't sell, either.") This became the imprint's anchor catalogue. Then he started getting pitches from other writers. He thought, Why not? He published four new titles by others last year, bringing the total to eleven. "I do say no a lot," he said. "Either I don't think it'll be good, or else it's too good for me."

—*Nick Paumgarten*

BRAVE NEW WORLD
THE COMFORTER CONUNDRUM

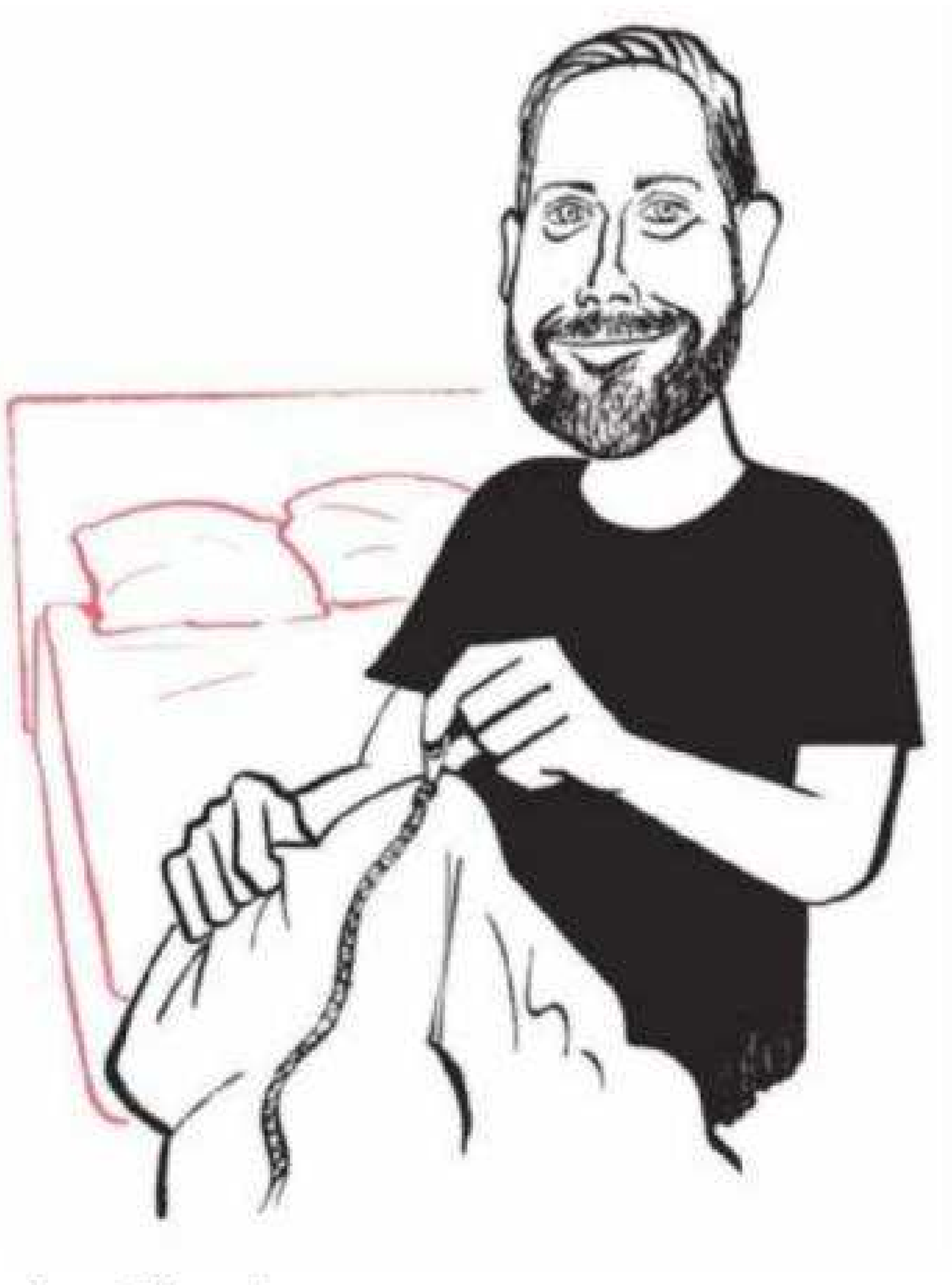


Los Angeles is lousy with pitches—unsolicited ideas proffered in elevators, at buffet spreads, while waiting for the barista to brew a chagaccino. In recent years, friends of Lee Eisenberg, an Emmy-nominated writer ("The Office") and creator ("Jury Duty"), had been worn down by his spiels on his latest project—a new kind of duvet cover. No more wrestling unruly comforters into floppy, restrictive sleeves with elusive corners, Eisenberg promised. Heads nodded, but eyes rolled, too. "Everyone acknowledged there was a problem," he recalled recently. "I don't know that anyone acknowledged I was the person to fix it."

Eisenberg has now sold hundreds of told-you-so's, at almost two hundred bucks a pop. While traditional duvet covers open on one side, requiring a bedmaker to awkwardly slide a comforter through a single entry slot, Eisenberg's Nuvet unzips on three sides. He likens the situation with traditional duvet-cover design to "having two pieces of bread and trying to smush the meat in, or the tomatoes." He pressed his palms together horizontally to illustrate. "That's a really stupid way of making a sandwich." The Nuvet, he said, is open-faced.

The burgeoning bedding magnate was seated at his Studio City desk at another new job, producing a yet-to-be-announced Apple TV series. He has a mostly silver beard and wore an olive polo shirt. Behind him, multicolor pushpins dotted a naked corkboard. Part of his scattershot Nuvet pitch approach, he explained, had been to tell enough people about the idea that he would feel obligated to follow through. "I also felt like if I talked to enough people someone would eventually say, 'Oh, you should talk to my cousin, they own Bed Bath & Beyond,'" he said. Close: One eventually connected him with Anum Teli, an entrepreneur whose family runs a textile factory in Pakistan, where the Nuvet is now made.

Eisenberg learned that a woman had patented a similar design; he paid fifteen thousand dollars to buy her out. (She had initially asked for six figures. "At which point I said no," Eisenberg said, "and 'How important is the patent?'") He and Teli began collaborating over Zoom as he learned about subjects like zipper-makers (YKK is the industry acme), flanges (little overhangs that hide said zipper), and cotton variations (they opted for Supima, a long-fibre luxury type). Soon, to the surprise of many in Hollywood, there were prototypes for friends and family to test. "I felt like, if I have the fix for something, I can will it to be," Eisenberg said. "That's so much of what producing is in Hollywood." Previously skeptical associates were won over. "There was kind of a delighted glee," he said. "Like if your dentist started a hot-dog stand, you'd be, like, Oh, that's surprising."



Lee Eisenberg

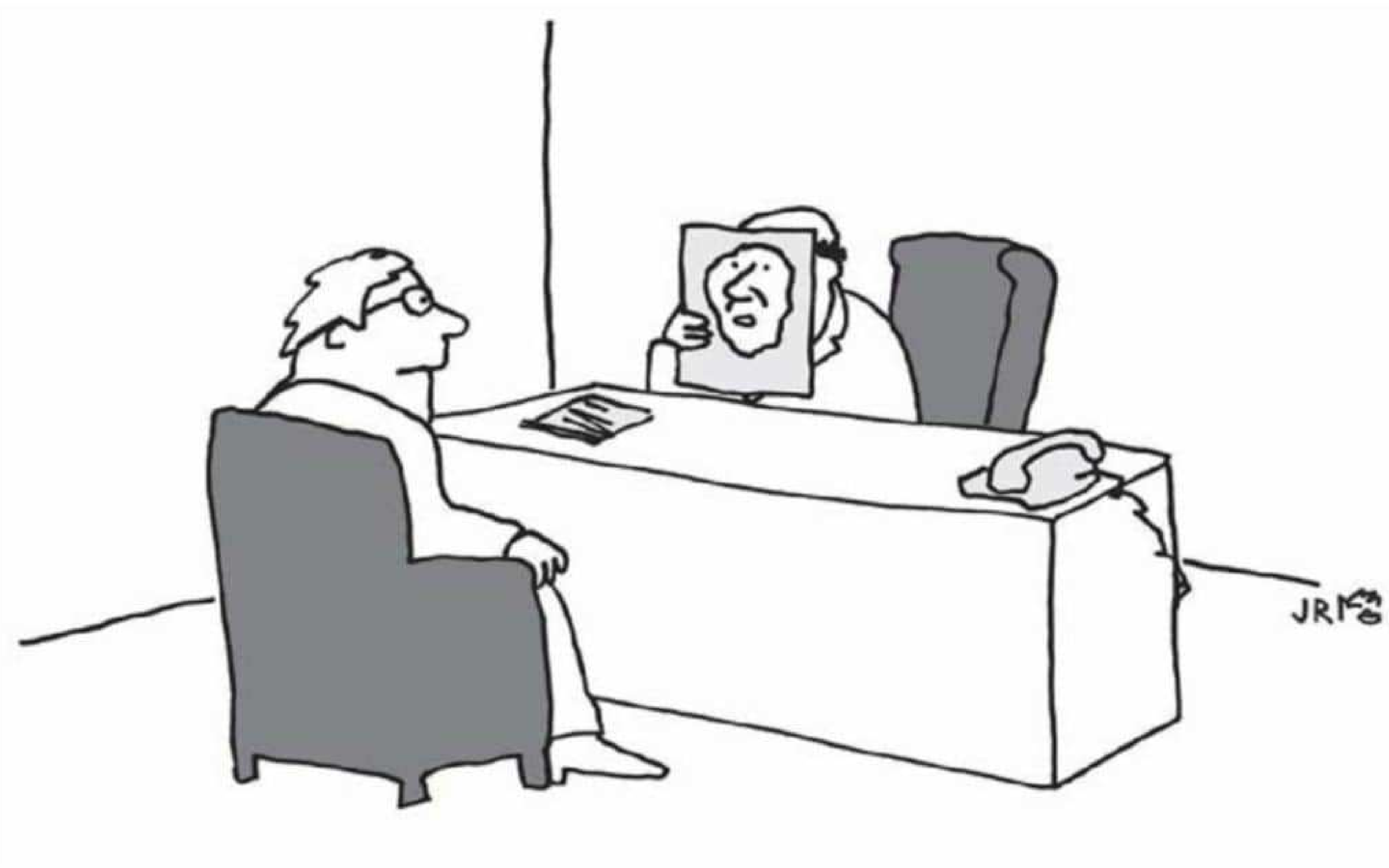
The pursuit was not totally ex nihilo. Eisenberg's father, an Israeli immigrant, was an upstart children's clothier in the Boston suburb of Needham. In high school, the younger Eisenberg belonged to an entrepreneurship club that ran a business printing companies' logos on pens and mugs; revenues reached fourteen thousand dollars. (He was the top salesperson.) "The Notes app on my phone is filled with 'Shark Tank' ideas," he said. Friends sometimes suggest he focus on writing. "If I don't have fifteen plates spinning at once, I get antsy," he said.

Others lent this particular plate crucial support. Christie Smith, a Hollywood manager friend, suggested the Nuvet's portmanteau moniker. ("The new way to duvet!") Eisenberg's wife, the journalist Emily Jane Fox, devised the tagline: "Less struggle, more snuggle." (He calls her Nuvet's "shadow C.O.O.") Famous pals and collaborators—Brie Larson, Mindy Kaling, Rainn Wilson—pitched in with free promo on social media.

"Hold on," Eisenberg said. His phone had dinged—an alert from Shopify, the sales platform he uses. "I just got a sale!" he announced. A king-size white Nuvet had been ordered in the Tampa area. "It's nice to see the fruits of your labor," he said.

A demonstration was arranged via Zoom. At his house in Los Feliz, Eisenberg showed off a navy model (the Nuvet also comes in sea-foam green), spread across his bed. The corners were turned up to reveal a white comforter placed neatly inside. He prepared, with detectable pride, to zip it shut. "It's hard to do with one hand," he conceded, and put the phone down. Twenty seconds later, the Nuvet was closed—struggle-free and snuggle-ready. How long had it been taking him to put on traditional duvet covers? "Like four, five minutes," he said. Hopefully, he explained, the Nuvet will become as synonymous with a big cotton sack as Kleenex is with tissues. He showed off one of his favorite features: a pair of internal tags reading "Feet Go Here," to help users properly orient their bedding. "I wanted to make it as dummy-proof as possible," he said. "Basically meaning, for me."

—*Dan Greene*



"Can you explain this gaping hole in your résumé?"

LOOK AND LISTEN
FACE TIME

We're being watched. But when, and by whom? Kashmir Hill, the author of the new book "Your Face Belongs to Us," took a walk around midtown the other day, to check out a few businesses that routinely capture visitors' biometric data. She wore a red coat and white boots, and her hair was a faded purple. First up: Macy's Herald Square. "Let's see if Macy's is still collecting face-recognition data," she said. Businesses that do so are required by city law to post signs alerting visitors. She'd noticed, earlier, that the store's signs were "very affixed to their walls." One in an entrance vestibule, below an inflatable reindeer, stated that Macy's "collects, retains, converts, stores, or shares customers' biometric identifier information."

Inside, Hill approached a member of the store's red-blazered security staff, who affirmed that the cameras deter shoplifters. Nearby, a shopper wearing a gray puffer noticed a camera overhead, and Hill began chatting with him. "If the costs aren't getting passed down to us, do you give up a little freedom for cheaper prices?" the shopper asked. Next, Hill engaged an architect from Brooklyn about the issue. "You don't know that your data's being collected," the architect said. "There should be a bigger sign."

Macy's has used Clearview AI, one of the subjects of Hill's book. (Popular Google searches involving the firm include "Is Clearview AI banned in the U.S.?," "Does Clearview AI have my photo?," "Does the F.B.I. use Clearview AI?") A 2020 data breach at Clearview, which was founded, in 2017, by two men who met at the Manhattan Institute, helped reveal that Madison Square Garden and thousands of law-enforcement agencies had used the technology, too.

Hill's next stop was the Moynihan Train Hall, in Penn Station. On the way, she noticed an N.Y.P.D. security camera on a street-light pole. "There's some things we allow businesses and companies to do that we're pretty uncomfortable seeing government actors do," she said. "If the government scraped all our photos and created this massive face-recognition database, we'd probably say that seems unconstitutional. But a private company does it and the government just buys from them."

At the station, she met up with James Mermigis, a lawyer representing two Madison Square Garden employees who were fired for not complying with vaccine mandates. Together, they walked over to the Garden. They had tickets to a concert by the 1975, but they had no intention of watching the show.

"I've never even heard of the 1975," Mermigis admitted. "I had to Google it." They were there on an undercover mission. The Garden's owner, James Dolan, has been using facial-recognition software to screen for lawyers who are engaged in legal cases against his companies, barring them from his venues. In the most high-profile ejection, a lawyer chaperoning her daughter's Girl Scout troop to see the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall was forced to sit out the show. Another man, whose twin brother is a lawyer, was recently forced to show I.D. before taking his seat at a Knicks game.

"I think the idea was, if you punish the lawyers, maybe they don't drag the lawsuits out for years," Hill said. "I was shocked by how many lawyers want to get into M.S.G. They're all trying to go to Phish shows." Hill tried to get in the Garden another time, with a banned lawyer, and the lawyer was turned away. (Recently, M.S.G. was the subject of a proposed class-action lawsuit alleging that the company "is weaponizing its facial recognition technology system and the consumer biometric data it collects to intimidate actual and prospective litigants and their attorneys.")

Hill and Mermigis shuffled through the Garden's metal detectors, under the black lenses of security cameras, and approached the ticket-scanning kiosks. "This should be fun!" Hill said.

To her astonishment, they walked right in. Mermigis, slightly deflated, located a security guard. "Do you use facial recognition?" he asked the man.

"Yeah," the guard replied. Mermigis confessed that he was one of the lawyers banned by Dolan.

"Oh, you're a lawyer?" the guard asked, unsure what Mermigis was driving at.

"You'd have already gotten a call at this point, right?" Hill asked.

"Look, I don't think you're going to get targeted," another guard said. "It'd probably just be a bigger lawsuit if you did."

"So you're saying that, because of the lawsuit now, they're not enforcing it anymore?" Mermigis asked.

"I don't think so," the second guard said. "They're only going to get in the headlines." He winked and added, "We didn't have this talk."

Walking to the escalator, Hill theorized that perhaps lawyers were only banned from sporting events. (A spokesperson from M.S.G. later said that discrimination cases, like the one Mermigis was pursuing, are exempt from the ban.) Mermigis headed home. He was planning to return for a Knicks game the following week. Hill decided to catch a little bit of the show. It was her first time at the Garden.

—*Adlan Jackson*

POSTSCRIPT
JOAN ACOCELLA

A new piece by Joan Acocella was reason enough to cancel plans. What had she chosen to tackle this time? Balanchine? The Book of Job? Harry Potter? Arsenic? There seemed to be no subject that she couldn't take on. A little over a year ago, I hoped to review a book on Chaucer's Wife of Bath. No dice; Joan had claimed it. Annoyance at not being able to write turned instantly to gladness at being able to read. Now I am doubly glad. Joan died last weekend, at seventy-eight, from cancer; that essay was the last she published in this magazine. She herself might not have been so deferential. "Remember: if I do not get to review it, I will throw myself out the window with a note pinned to my chest saying that this was all your fault," she once wrote to an editor, of a history of tap dance. "Happy new year! May you be rich and happy!"

That humor was pure Joan. No writer was funnier, or more original. "*Clang! Clang!* " her essay on Martin Luther begins; that is the sound of the hammer nailing the Ninety-five Theses to the church. Her own sound was singular, in life as in print. If you called her, as I often did while working with her as a fact checker, a decade ago, and then as an editor's assistant, you got used to waiting out a dozen rings and the answering-machine greeting—she screened the old-fashioned way—followed by the sudden burst of that rich, deliberate voice picking the conversation up midstream. (She might hang up just as suddenly to rush out to the movies with her partner, Noël Carroll, whom she liked to call "my boyfriend.") Sarah Larson, who did transcription work for her back in the day, remembers Joan swanning out from her bedroom mid-afternoon-nap in nightgown and eye mask to intercept a message from Mikhail Baryshnikov. "In him there is simply more to see than in most other dancers," she wrote in a Profile, to the point as ever.

On the page, her fabulous erudition was melded to a frankness that was so unaffected as to seem effortless. Actually—a very Joan word—simplicity is hard work, and Joan worked hard. She wrote her drafts in longhand and sent page proofs by fax. She liked her diction blunt, earthy, threaded with startling touches of beauty. I laugh when I read her description of the puppeteer Basil Twist's abstract "Symphonie Fantastique," with "blue disks that bump into each other, like who the hell are you" and "something whirling in a circle, like an enraged doughnut." She put David Remnick in mind of both Virginia Woolf and the hardboiled sportswriter Heywood Broun. Naturally, Joan described her own style best. "I like a little sand in my oyster," she said—a motto to live by.

Joan was born in San Francisco, grew up in Oakland, and planned to be an academic. She got her Ph.D. in comparative literature at Rutgers, then became a critic, writing for the many instead of the few. There is an idea that criticism is about the passing of judgment. Joan told Leo Carey, her last editor at the magazine, that though she sometimes felt unsure of her writing, or her ability to keep doing it, she always knew that her take was the right one. She certainly didn't pull her punches. "I thought that if she didn't stop grinning at me, as if to say, 'Ain't we got fun,' I would run up onstage and strangle her," she wrote of a dancer who displeased her.

But a good critic must be much more than a judge. She must be an alchemist, transforming art and the experience of it into words. That power was pure Joan. It is what made her such a wonderful writer about new and classic literature alike, reviving the obscure and reconsidering the legendary. And it is what made her such a great writer on dance, her big love, and on ballet in particular, an art that can seem forbiddingly inaccessible to the nonspecialist. Here she is, at the end of that same Baryshnikov Profile, watching in astonishment and letting the reader watch along with her:

> He rose like a piston; he landed like a lark. He took off like Jerry Lee Lewis; he finished like Jane Austen. From ledge to ledge of the dance he leapt, surefooted, unmindful, a man in love. The audience knew what they were seeing. The air in the theatre thickened almost visibly. . . . By that time, we actually wanted him to stop, so that we could figure out what had happened to us.

The figuring-out was her challenge; watching her do it was our reward. A good piece of criticism "should be shapely. It should be deep as well as personal," Joan said. "If we achieve it, our work will be no more in need of defending than a poem or a novel." Joan achieved it. No defense needed—only gratitude, our thanks.

—*Alexandra Schwartz*

PROFILES

DETAIL ORIENTED

The precision comedy of Jacqueline Novak.

BY CARRIE BATTAN

Her new Netflix special is part standup act and part philosophy lecture.

The comic Jacqueline Novak wears the same outfit each time she performs her solo show, “Get on Your Knees”: a loose gray T-shirt, jeans, and a broken-in pair of white-and-gray sneakers. The clothes allow her a kind of anonymity and neutrality, as well as comfort. “Get on Your Knees” is part standup act, part coming-of-age story, and part philosophy lecture. It is also an athletic feat, so she often wears a sports bra, a practical choice that nonetheless warranted extensive consideration before a performance one evening in the summer of 2021. Novak had dedicated the previous four years to the show, but she was still tinkering, refining, and annotating each creative decision she made, particularly as she anticipated taping the show for a Netflix special. “I love sports bras,” she said in front of a mirror in the greenroom at the Cherry Lane Theatre, in the West Village, where she was doing a ten-week run. “But there’s this belief, inherently, that I’m not supposed to be wearing a sports bra. Do you know what I mean? It’s too athletic.”

Novak, who is prone to self-narration, doubled back: “But then I’m, like, why do I feel the audience is owed a separation of my breasts?” Novak is forty-one, but she has a girlish face and a long-standing interest in elaborate skin-care rituals that, to an audience member, might make her look like the high-school version of herself she explores in the performance.

“Get on Your Knees” is a ninety-minute show about fellatio, a description that might make people assume that Novak is yet another raunch comic. In fact, much of the performance is about how insufficient the language around sex can be. “I think the word ‘erection’ is a bit architectural for what’s happening there,” she says at one point. “I don’t think anyone should go in that building. It’s not up to code.”

“For Jacqueline, the show is about taking a very mundane, crude act and whipping it into a cosmic frenzy,” the comic John Early, who directed the live version of the show, said. Fred Armisen, the comic and actor, said, “It feels somehow good-spirited—there’s nothing mean in it. I really could bring my mom without having to explain anything.” Novak’s own parents have seen the show dozens of times.

Novak’s longtime boyfriend, the comic Chris Laker, said, “No one’s ever asked me if it’s uncomfortable for me.” Laker, whose personality is a mellow counterweight to Novak’s kinetic disposition, has a dry affect. “If they did, I would just be, like, ‘Whatever.’ ”

Most comics build hour-long sets piecemeal, workshopping jokes in shorter appearances, earning more stage time, and eventually stitching their best bits together. Novak, though, wrote “Get on Your Knees” as a complete set, in 2017. Then she sent out a call to her Instagram followers, asking if any of them would let her stage it for them. At a party in Brooklyn, she performed for a room of strangers. Laker warmed the crowd up, and she did the show on a small wooden platform that had been constructed by the hosts. Bigger venues in Los Angeles and New York followed, and by the time of the 2021 Cherry Lane run the show had attracted attention from such celebrities as Lucas Hedges, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Emma Stone. The pop-music producer Mark Ronson boasted on Instagram about having seen it five times, and Sally Field visited Novak backstage after a performance.

Novak has described herself as a P. T. Barnum figure who enjoys managing every aspect of her travelling show. In the early days, she hired a publicity firm

PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA JOHNSON

to help promote it, but eventually took on those duties herself. For most of her runs, she has been in charge of coördinating her performances, with the help of an intern turned assistant. On tour, Novak constructed the merchandise stand herself, stocking it with "Get on Your Knees" T-shirts and sweatshirts. With the help of a friend, she even coded a contactless digital program for the show, "instead of paying someone three thousand dollars to do it," she said.

"I'm texting with her, and she's, like, 'I'm buying digital billboards in Detroit!'" Kate Berlant, who hosts the popular podcast "Poog" with Novak, said. "I'm, like, 'You're insane.' " When Novak noticed that a new restaurant was opening on the same block as the Cherry Lane, she tried to arrange a joint opening-night event. She got no response.

"This is becoming true of everything now: I want the details. Even with Netflix," she told me after she finished postproduction for the special, which will air later this month. She had insisted on joining video editors and sound engineers to audit their work and participate in their processes. She had also asked to review the closed captioning. Caitlin Hotchkiss, a Netflix development executive, said that in her six years at the company she had never fielded such a request. "I'm not the artist who is, like, I just show up and do the thing," Novak said.

At Netflix, specials are pumped out rapidly; the postproduction process can be executed in less than a month. (Novak's took five months.) She told me recently, "I always anticipate friction, because when you feel like you're being a bad client or student . . . And then people are amenable. And I go, Right, I gotta remember that. Natasha really helped me a lot with that." She was referring to the actress Natasha Lyonne, who directed the "Get on Your Knees" special. (Lyonne had never met Novak before seeing the show during an early run at Dynasty Typewriter, in Los Angeles, but she immediately asked who would eventually direct the special.) Novak went on, "She was looking out for my creative interests in that way, when I might have been feeling the pressure of being a good student."

Lyonne, who describes the show as "a Swiss clock," said, "We would talk about it—should it be one hour? Because that's what the algorithm prefers." Novak insisted that the show retain its ninety-minute length. Advisers and collaborators often reminded Novak and Lyonne that they were working on a comedy special, not a movie. "It's in the fuckin' word: 'special,'" Lyonne said. At one point, Novak made her own edits at home on iMovie, experimenting with different types of shots. "I would see people be, like, 'Why is this detail necessary?'" Lyonne said. "If you just give her a chance to explain it, it's very hard to not be seduced."

In the years between signing the Netflix contract and releasing "Get On Your Knees," Novak has endlessly workshopped the show. The taping was delayed several times, in part because of the pandemic but also because Novak wanted, she said, to "get on the road to have it in my bones to perform."

She started stitching together audio from every performance, broken down by joke, in an effort to determine which was the best version. This level of exactitude isn't unusual for her. For Novak, even hunting for deals online can take the form of a spiritual quest with high personal stakes. "Ten per cent is joyless," she told me. "Ten per cent off is only meaningful in bulk. Don't talk to me unless it's twenty. You know when it's, like, 'up to twenty-five per cent off'? The 'up to' is the biggest insult. One item is twenty-five per cent off and the rest is three per cent off. It's devastating."

I first began corresponding with Novak in the spring of 2020, during the depths of lockdown, just after she had cancelled a tour for "Get on Your Knees." Our initial call took several attempts to schedule, though neither of us had much going on. Planning our second call, a few months afterward, was even more difficult. Novak takes a fine-tooth comb to every social interaction, a habit that makes for brilliant comedy but exasperating real-life exchanges. At one point, she confessed over e-mail, "im being a little obsessive about being full of energy when we speak."

By the time we spoke, we'd had so many interactions that I felt we had developed a form of intimacy. "Waking up in the morning, I was almost, like, I don't know how to be profiled," she said on the phone to me one afternoon. "There is no constitution there. I'm dissolute, or something. I was waiting for myself to come into focus enough."

Backstage at the Cherry Lane in 2021, Novak applied a light layer of makeup and flat-ironed her hair, which is naturally curly. She and her assistant reviewed the guest list. Every night, Novak pored over the list of ticket holders to see who might show up. "My awareness of who's in the audience has a profound effect on my internal experience," she told me. "I found out this guy from my high school came last night."

Much of the show centers on Novak's fraught quest to successfully perform a blow job in high school. She tells the audience about how her field-hockey teammates encouraged the endeavor. At one performance, three women who had played on the team sat in the second row. This added a new layer of prospective humiliation for Novak. "Even though I reference things that are my own life and literal, I'm, like, 'How crass if someone from my town or my high school treats it as if I'm just talking about my life. Excuse you? This is art,'" she said. "Of course, it's not their job to be exactly what I think they should be."

Shame is the root of most comedy, but Novak prefers to grapple with shame's more free-spirited and familiar cousin: embarrassment. Her mother, Naomi Novak, told me that one of her daughter's first words was "embarrassing." "It's so 'barrassin'," she would say. In "How to Weep in Public," a memoir-slash-self-help book that Novak published in 2016, she wrote, "Even as a newborn in the hospital, I tended to turn away and bury my face."

Novak has two older siblings, and she developed an early analytical streak by observing them at home, in Westchester County, New York. Her mother recalls watching Novak's nursery-school class through a window and noting that her daughter was completely silent; when she got home, however, she recounted every detail she'd seen. One day, Novak's teachers called Naomi in to discuss a conversation they'd overheard. A boy had asked Novak, "Does your mother have a penis?" She'd replied in the same blunt but lyrical way that she talks about sex in "Get on Your Knees": "No, she has a vagina. But hers has feathers."

Naomi's father was a rabbi, and Novak's paternal grandparents came from Christian families. The clan delights in mashing up the customs of both cultures. "We're a family of analyzers," her father, Greg, said.

As the baby of the family, Novak sought out attention in a "wholesome way," her brother, Jeff, said—by performing. In second grade, she played Gavroche, the swaggering young boy from "Les Misérables." (A clip of the performance later aired on an episode of "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon.") By the time she was a teenager, though, Novak's theatrical streak had receded, giving way to a more scholarly and self-conscious nature.

Around this time, Novak's father read "Think and Grow Rich," the 1937 book by Napoleon Hill and Rosa Lee Beeland, which has been characterized as "the granddaddy of all motivational literature." The book inspired Greg to quit his corporate job to begin his own freelance marketing business. In the process, he accrued a small library of self-help tools, including a collection of Tony Robbins tapes. He often played the tapes in the car, and found an unlikely audience for them in his teenage daughter. More recently, Novak helped her father start a podcast about Hegel, called "The Cunning of Geist."

In "Get on Your Knees," Novak describes the scene in which her field-hockey teammates urged her to get her first blow job out of the way. One night, she recalls, they offered her a beer and escorted her to her boyfriend's house. "Sounds like peer pressure, the kind they warned us about. I didn't experience it as such," she says. "I experienced their pressure as support, because I was a young Tony Robbins reader. I knew that if you tell people your goals you become more likely to achieve them."

When Novak arrived at Georgetown, in 2000, she decided that she would no longer sit on the sidelines. As a freshman, she became part of an improv troupe whose alumni include Mike Birbiglia, Nick Kroll, and John Mulaney. (Birbiglia is an executive producer of the Netflix special.)

Novak hated the self-consciousness she experienced when performing. Her creative-writing courses, meanwhile, gave her a sense of belonging, which was worse—she was repulsed by the ease she felt in that setting. Novak describes her time doing improv as a form of masochism. She remembers telling Mulaney, "'You know how this is coming so easily to you that it's not even funny? You know what you're fucking doing, and you know you've got it. All you have to do now is be humble.'

"I was almost, like, 'You're a coward! You do what comes naturally!'" she told me. "It was this feeling of, like, my road is going to be longer."

After college, Novak moved to New York, where she performed standup in small clubs while doing copywriting for advertising agencies. She had struggled with periods of depression for much of her life, and her advertising job exacerbated the condition. One evening, Novak went to bed early to get a good night's sleep, only to wake up twenty-eight hours later, having missed an entire workday.

She was fired from the advertising agency and moved back into her childhood bedroom in the suburbs to live out what she now frequently refers to as her "depression years." For Novak, a self-described former hypersomniac, this period informs many decisions that she makes today. She guards her physical and emotional energy fiercely, and experiments with new products and rituals to help her outrun the looming spectre of depression. She sometimes follows a very low-carb diet to regulate her blood sugar and her mood. She uses a machine called a "vitality swing" to quell her restless-leg syndrome. She's tried a mountain of supplements, along with THC gummies, past-life-regression therapy, astral projection, energy-healing workshops, a Kundalini-yoga DVD called "Dancing the Chakras," and a drink that involves blending frozen blueberries with an entire lemon, including the rind. She is particular about the physical exercises she does; she demands that her workouts have a guiding principle or philosophy. "I need a bigger idea behind what I'm doing," she told me.

For a brief period in the summer of 2022, depression caught up with Novak again. "The black dog's got me," she announced to Berlant on an unusually sombre episode of their podcast, using an expression favored by Winston Churchill. (Novak once threw an event called a "depression carnival" and made a papier-mâché black dog for it.) Novak went on to say that, in her desperation, she had even attempted to sign up for one of the podcast's sponsors—the virtual-therapy service Better Help. She and Berlant joked about the questions on the intake form. "This is the most perfectly integrated, authentic ad," Novak said.

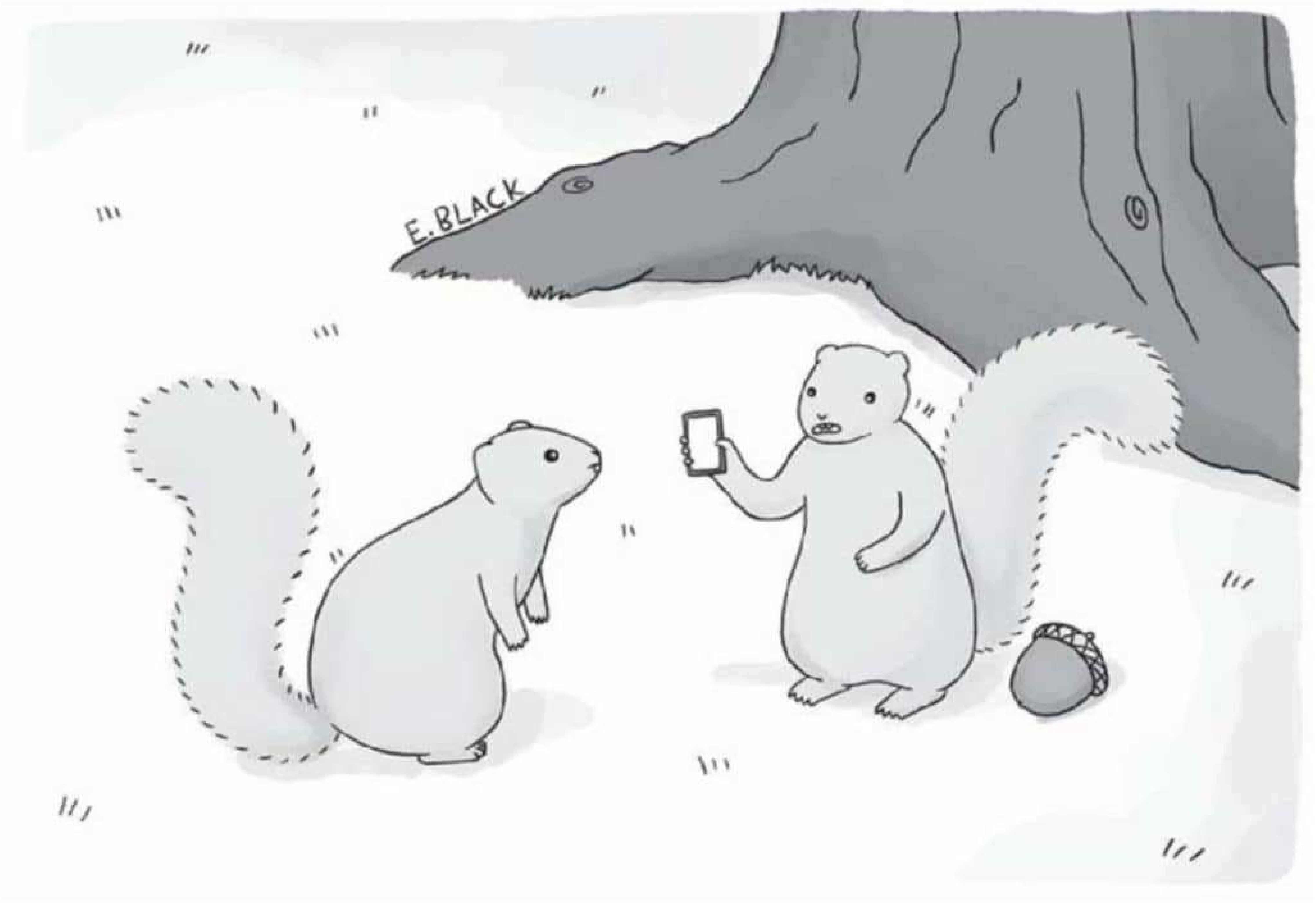
During the following week's episode, the black dog was still present. Novak suspected that it had some connection to her glucose levels: "It has brought me to: O.K., it's the blueberries. They spike my glucose. They send me high and then bring me low." Berlant, concerned, asked, "But then what do you have, then? Fish oil, and . . . ?" Near the end of the episode, Novak began to cry. "It's not the depression—I don't care about that," she said. "I'm literally humiliated by the fact that I'm someone who tries to be off bread, because it's so ugly."

Many of Novak's best-loved early jokes were about food. In her appearances on late-night shows, she did a more generic form of comedy, with setups and punch lines, performing a kind of brash puncturing of delicate femininity. "I love nachos, but I am done getting them in a restaurant with a group of women as a shared appetizer," she said during a set on "The Late Late Show with James Corden." "The moment that the nachos arrive at the table, the women are always surprised by the size of the plate. . . . And I get sucked into this farce. I start acting like I don't know how to handle the nachos."

In 2014, Novak released a comedy album called "Quality Notions," on which she explored some of the material that would later become "Get on Your Knees." She then wrote "How to Weep in Public," a humorous guide featuring "feeble offerings on depression from one who knows.” In the book, she encouraged fellow-depressives to let themselves fall as deeply into the hole as they can go. “While most books on depression try to help you win the war, this one is merely a cigarette in the trenches,” she wrote.

Ultimately, it was antidepressants that pulled Novak out of her post-college depressive fog. She moved back to the city and began doing standup in New York’s flourishing alternative-comedy scene, growing close with Berlant and Early. Armisen caught a Novak set at a benefit show and immediately began to consider her as a future opener. “She was talking about pizza, and how easy it is to eat pizza,” he told me. “She says things like it’s an observation she’s just sharing with you personally. It felt a little bit like she must have just thought of this right before she went onstage.”

But Novak struggled to break through. “Pretty much everybody who was doing comedy at that time has seen Jacqueline do little five- or ten-minute sets, and knows she’s brilliant, but, when you’re performing in little bars, you’re doing sets for mostly drunk people who are not there in good faith,” Early said. “I’ve kind of watched Jacqueline spin her notions on deaf ears for so many years.” Novak’s boyfriend, Laker, said of the time, “I would be the one who would always be, like, ‘I gotta go out tonight! I gotta be around!’ She didn’t care about that stuff.”



“It’s an app where you can record all the acorns you try and also see what acorns your friends are eating.”

In 2017, Novak had an epiphany. The key to success wasn’t slowly working your way up, grasping for small opportunities. Instead, she decided to channel her energies into one exceptional piece of work. She told Laker about this fairly abstract plan while walking near their apartment, on the Upper West Side. He told me, “She had that realization of: You’ve gotta make one great thing and concentrate on that.”

She revisited some essays she’d written in a memoir class in high school. “Because I was self-identifying as this writer in high school, I was always metabolizing my own experience,” Novak told me. She remembers having an acute awareness that her experiences might be chronicled one day. “Am I living enough?” she would ask herself. “Which is the most embarrassing thing,” she said. “You’re supposed to be running through the streams barefoot, not having nostalgia for it as it’s happening.”

In college, Novak spent a summer in St. Petersburg, Russia, participating in a creative-writing seminar. There, she bonded with Liz Phang, now a television writer, over the experience of visiting Peter the Great’s cabinet of curiosities, which was filled with gruesome objects he’d collected in the eighteenth century. Phang remembers Novak impersonating fetuses with birth defects stored in jars, wrapping her arms around her torso as if to fit in a jar. “She was thinking of what it was to be the fetus,” Phang said.

At the time, Novak was working on an essay about having sex with someone who disgusted her. “She was diving into discomfort in writing in a way that I hadn’t seen before from a peer,” Phang said. “It was never maudlin or overdramatic.” Back at Georgetown, Novak continued to write about sex in her creative-writing classes. For one paper, she focussed on the first time she learned about blow jobs, in high school. “Georgetown was very preppy, and I was almost, like . . . Well, fuck you. I’m not afraid, you cornballs,” she said.

That essay became the germ of “Get on Your Knees,” which was originally titled “How Embarrassing for Her.” Novak used crafty strategies to draw attention to the show. She knew that Early had a fan base, and that if he was in the room people would show up. She presented versions of the show where he’d sit onstage with her and, as a bit, offer notes and feedback at the end of the performance. Eventually, this transformed into a more formal director-performer relationship.

One element of “Get on Your Knees” that was a constant challenge for Novak and Early was the tone. It was the #MeToo era, with its accompanying outrage at the Trump Administration, and they recognized how easily the show could slip into a mode of moral slam-dunking. They wanted to avoid imbuing the act with any kind of trauma narrative that rang false. “I think Jacqueline would be mortified if anyone in the audience thought she was trying to teach them a lesson, and I would be mortified by that, too,” Early said. “We were both scared that audiences would be hungry for . . . the sort of show where they could pat themselves on the back and be, like, ‘Yasss, queen.’ ”

At one point in the narrative, Novak recalls being unable to perform oral sex. She offers her boyfriend her virginity as a consolation prize. The central moment of the show arrives when Novak is finally, after an eternity of hand-wringing and failure, on the brink of her first blow job. She'd been reading "Lolita," and as she kneeled, paralyzed before her boyfriend's pelvic region, she thought, as she tells the audience, "What if I imagine that I'm just a character in a short story written by Vladimir Nabokov? Then no matter how badly this attempt at a blow job goes, in Nabokov's deft pen, would the prose not sparkle?" She went on, "This was not dissociation, no, this was me with an idea, this was transcendence of the ego. There's a difference!"

In 2019, Novak booked her first run at the Cherry Lane, and welcomed scouts from major streaming platforms to watch. A Netflix rep sat in the front row during one show, which rattled her. "I guess it wasn't undeniable that day," she said. Netflix passed. She and her agent decided that, instead of giving up, they would invite Netflix's vice-president of comedy, Robbie Praw, to a performance at Largo, in Los Angeles. "Everyone in the comedy world was buzzing about this show she was doing," Praw wrote me in an e-mail. "It was clearly a singular, important work." He offered her a deal, as did HBO. She went with Netflix.

Novak was emboldened by the success. But she noticed that people were praising her for finally "finding her voice," which didn't sit quite right with her. "I finally found my confidence, and the way to trick you into liking it," she said.

Novak and Laker moved to Los Angeles in 2019, having decided that their time in New York was a "rough draft," she said. That year, she and Berlant frequently visited L.A.'s Korean spas together, and discussed what they were putting into their bodies or on their skin. Both women had long considered podcasting to be a humiliating comedy cliché. "I always said when we first started this, 'My greatest fear is to be known for a podcast,'" Berlant told me. But one day, while in a salt cave at a spa, Novak and Berlant made plans for a show that felt fresh enough to pursue. "Poog" would offer a novel perspective on wellness—not as an all-encompassing pursuit or as an object of ridicule but as a pastime.

"It's the fantasy that some improvement lies around the corner with the next product, device, morning routine, or dietary adjustment," Novak explained to me a few months before the podcast débuted, in November, 2020. "We joke about how we love a scam. Bring on the snake oil. Please, I want to believe!" "Poog"—a play on the name of Gwyneth Paltrow's wellness empire, Goop—was conceived as "an indulging of that compulsion without any attempt to pretend that it's a value." It was also an opportunity for Berlant to establish a weekly cadence of conversation with her friend. "I joke that I wanted to do a podcast with her so I could force her to talk to me for an hour every week, because she really can be quite an elusive character," Berlant told me. "We'll talk about a plan, and I'm, like, Promise me you'll go there! I'm always having this panic to nail her down, to force her to be available to me."

"Don't you want to help us climb out of the Stone Age by going back to school?"

Just before the pandemic, Novak and Berlant shopped "Poog" around to various platforms, including Will Ferrell's new podcast venture, Big Money Players Network. "The title alone made me laugh outloud," Ferrell wrote me in an e-mail. Novak and Berlant signed with Ferrell's company.

Descriptions of "Poog" episodes can read like nonsense: "The symbolism of high-SPF sunscreen, cartoonish inchworms, and self-hating magicians are discussed. . . . Long foam bendable whatevers. The promise of science. Fiberwig. The Prestige is recapitulated and its stars scrutinized."

"Our producers were, like, 'What the fuck is this?'" Berlant told me. But "Poog" took off quickly, earning the loyalty of so-called Poog Hags as well as of performers like Amy Schumer and Miranda July. " 'Poog' has a very specific audience," Hans Sahni, the head of content at Big Money Players Network, said. "It doesn't need to be everyone's favorite show, but it needs to be someone's favorite—not just one podcast in the rotation."

July, who didn't know Novak or Berlant well, e-mailed them during the pandemic to see if they'd be interested in having an unrecorded weekly Zoom conversation with her. They agreed. "It was a really high level of thought," July said, describing their calls. "As we squirmed, questioning our lives . . . we were looking at things through a Jungian lens, applying different books we were recommending to each other. It was not a completely myopic shit-talk cryfest."

One frequent topic of conversation on "Poog" is the experience of dining in restaurants. Anyone who is close with Novak likes to say that a restaurant dinner is the pinnacle of the Novak social experience. It's an existentially fraught endeavor that brings together all flavors of humiliation and opportunities for analysis. There are painful encounters with servers; allergens lurking in every dish; and the ever-present possibility of not getting enough food. Early said that his main goal while working with Novak on "Get on Your Knees" was to make the show feel like a dinner-length conversation.

Novak and I met for dinner one evening after a show, at an Italian restaurant in the Flatiron district that she'd selected, looking up its menu in advance. Carbs were fair game that night, but Novak has a tree-nut allergy, which is a constant hazard for her. She'd been to the restaurant once before and had declined to eat the meatballs, because she was wary of how she might react to pine nuts. To prepare for this dinner, she'd conducted an experiment at home by eating a small amount of pine nuts, EpiPen in hand. She was fine.

"So you can have pine nuts?" our waiter asked.

She nodded. "Another allergen I haven't tested in a long time—and I'm so embarrassed to be this person—is clams. It's the only other thing I can't have," she told him. After a prolonged back-and-forth about the shareability of various dishes, Novak allowed the waiter to pick a selection of his favorites. He seemed enraptured by the show that Novak was putting on for him, which she cushioned with dashes of self-awareness and gestures of sympathy. It was sweltering, and she took note of his uniform. "I hate that you have to wear a long-sleeved shirt," she told him.

It is nearly impossible to keep Novak on topic. (Because of this, I chose to glean most biographical information about her from her family members and her book, instead of asking her directly.) A comment I made about a recent "Poog" episode set off a firestorm of tangents—about the fitness mogul Tracy Anderson, the untimely death of a Kundalini-yoga figurehead known as Guru Jagat, the fantasy of bringing a pet to a restaurant, chia seeds, a cocktail she'd had with her cousin the musician Jack Antonoff that she hadn't realized contained pistachios, the idea of daddy longlegs being more upsetting than rats.

"I have six things to tell you about the last five minutes," Novak said. "I was also thinking about how I want to know about your life. Is that irritating?"

A waiter strolled by. "I almost get scared when they come," she said.

The conversation turned to Novak's Netflix taping, a subject she had been wrestling with and keeping at bay since she signed the contract. She was thinking about why she got into comedy, and what she hoped to accomplish. She had been performing—almost to the point of compulsion—her show in both traditional theatrical venues and standup clubs, but couldn't figure out which was better. A theatre like the Cherry Lane felt perhaps "too precious" to her. "It's almost too much of a natural fit for a creative-writing major like myself," she said.

"There's a reason I went into the comedy world, and it's because it's a lowbrow world," she went on. "Which expectation am I more excited to upset?"

She considered for a moment. "I actually think the comedy side is more exciting to upset," she said. "To me, going into the theatre and being unexpectedly vulgar is not that exciting. Going into the scary, adversarial world of standup and being extra vulgar, and, like, pretentious . . . that's exciting."

One night in June, I visited the back patio of the Ludlow Hotel, where Novak had invited people to celebrate the taping of "Get on Your Knees," the first installment of which had taken place earlier that evening, at Town Hall. The space was dense with supporters, Drew Barrymore and Natasha Lyonne among them. Laker stood to one side, calmly surveying the crowd. After a long, hushed conversation with the actress Brie Larson, Novak walked across the patio, looking a bit dazed. I told her that I had a question I'd been wondering about for months. What made her feel ready to film the special, after years of fiddling? Pressure from Netflix? Financial stakes? Workshopping the show so intensely that she got tired of it? Finally achieving perfection?

Novak turned to metaphor. "If I'm not being vigilant with my thinking, I would slip into the mind-set that taping the special is like the fucking balance beam at the Olympics," she said. "Training for this specific thing, for years, and then there's this big fuckin' day where it all better come together and crystallize. That is an extraordinary amount of pressure." On "Poog," she'd been referring to the taping as her "wedding," because of how much preparation it demanded. That mind-set, she knew on some level, was foolish.

"All of these fantasies of tacking my mind down and working in this way of funnelling everything toward the best version . . . I had to completely fucking let go of," she said.

There's a line that appeared early in some performances of "Get on Your Knees" about the humiliation of the human body. "I look forward to discarding the form, the flesh . . . its many indignities, needs, wants," Novak says. Still, she could not ignore the needs and wants of the human form as she prepared to film. She spent much of the next day shopping for a new pair of jeans, because the ones she'd been wearing for years had finally deteriorated beyond usability. When she arrived at Town Hall for the second night of taping, she'd bought so many pairs that she had to transport them in a rolling suitcase. Finally, she let Lyonne select a pair of distressed Levi's 501s.

During the performance, the new jeans made themselves known. Pacing around the stage, riffing on the idea of ghosts, Novak kept fiddling with the waistband, absent-mindedly tucking her T-shirt into it.

"I am what many would arguably call a heterosexual woman," she told the crowd. Suddenly, a voice came over the sound system. Lyonne was on the lookout for possible continuity issues. "Novak, untuck your shirt, please?" she pleaded. Novak obliged. "There she is! Sorry, go on," Lyonne said.

Out of rhythm, Novak asked where to start from. "From wherever you want, baby," Lyonne responded.

"From the top?" Novak smiled devilishly, and the crowd cackled. Suddenly, the performance, which had been chiselled and molded and tended to for many years, took on an element of improvisation.

"All right, let me think. O.K.," she said. The crowd laughed. "Guys, thank you. You looked like you were worried for me. I appreciate it, but . . . I got this." The room began to whoop and cheer in unison.

Novak remained off-script. "I had this big realization about the theatre today," she said. "It's a bunch of people, all facing one direction. And I'm facing the other direction." ♦

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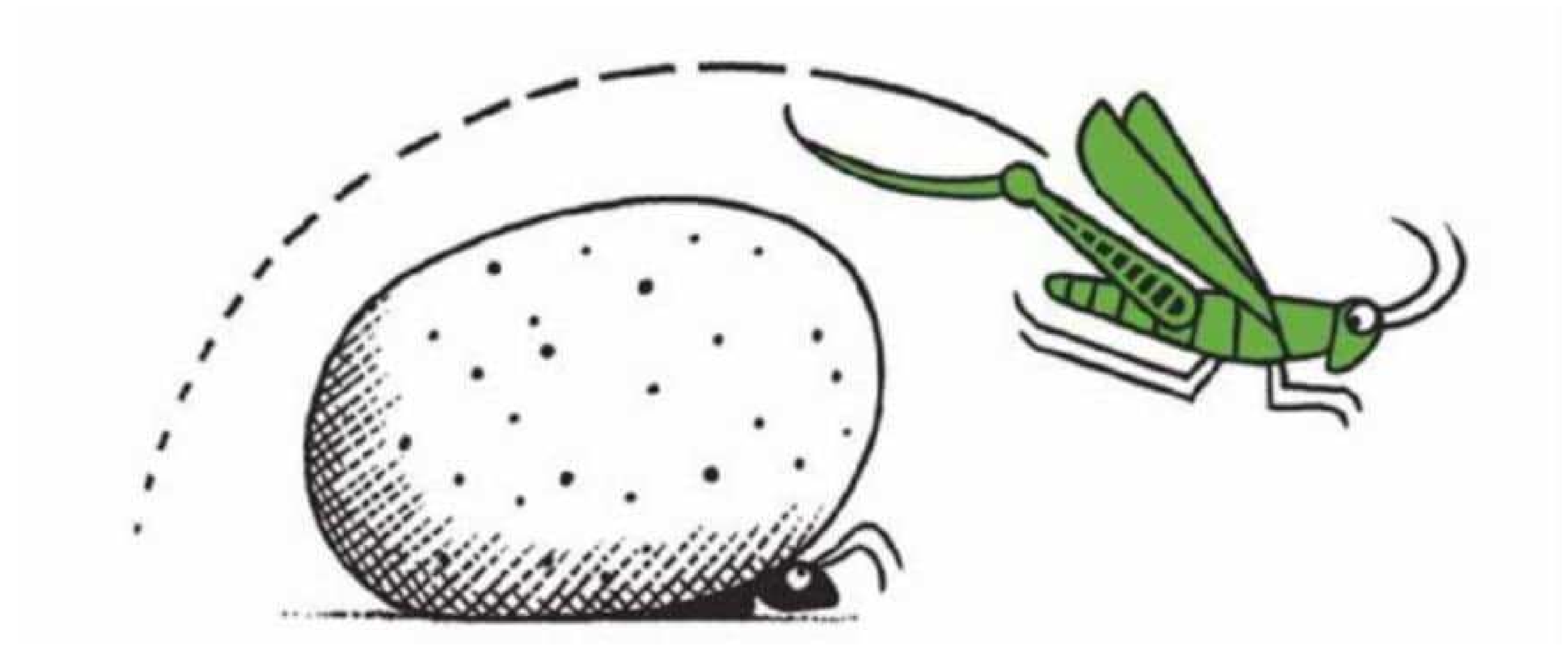

MILLENNIAL FABLE

BY SIMON RICH

Once upon a time, around 2010 or so, there lived a hardworking ant and a carefree grasshopper. The grasshopper was hopping to his heart's content one sunny morning when the ant trudged by, bearing a large load.

"Why aren't you hopping?" chirped the grasshopper. "The summer is upon us, and the days are meant for dancing."

"I'm studying for the GRE," said the ant. "And I strongly suggest you do the same."

"Why would I waste this sunshine toiling?" scoffed the grasshopper. "I was thinking, we should try Four Loko before it gets banned." And then he shouted "YOLO!," because it was during that brief period of time when people actually did that.

The ant smiled smugly at the grasshopper. "It may be summer now," she cautioned. "But winter will soon be upon us. Failing to prepare is preparing to fail." And, with that, she marched into a Starbucks to practice analogies.

The ant went on to graduate school, where she diligently gathered useful skills like coding and statistics. The grasshopper, meanwhile, got work as a barback and moved into a tiny nest in Bed-Stuy. By winter, he'd lost touch with the ant entirely, although for a few years he would get spam e-mails saying she'd invited him to join LinkedIn.

Then, in 2024, the grasshopper ran into the ant at a wedding. There were bags under her eyes and her antennae looked droopy. The grasshopper assumed she was tired from toiling, but it turned out she'd been unemployed for months. Meta had laid her off by e-mail and all the skills she'd learned in school had been automated by artificial intelligence. Her 401(k) was drained, and she was close to defaulting on her student loans. In order to make her monthly payments, she'd had to move in with her dad and his girlfriend in New Jersey, even though they had a really small apartment and there was zero privacy, like *none*. Like, she hadn't seen them having sex or anything, but she'd definitely seen things that she wished she hadn't, like boundaries were blurring in the apartment about what was acceptable to wear in common areas.

"Got any coke?" she asked abruptly.

"Not on me," said the grasshopper.

The ant drained her champagne flute, then his. "I can't believe this is my life," she said, staring at her claws. "I did everything I thought I was supposed to do. While everyone was hopping, I was foraging and gathering and interning . . ." She shook her head slowly, a far-off look in her eyes. "This morning, I saw my dad's balls. He was wearing a robe, but it was loose, and when he walked by the couch where I've been sleeping, *bam*. There they were. Like, can't miss them, eye level. Right in my face. His balls, man."

The grasshopper knew it was impolite to ask, but he couldn't help himself.

"How much do you owe?"

The ant hesitated. "Including undergrad?"

"Just tell me," said the grasshopper.

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

"It's probably not as bad as you think."

The ant peeked through her claws. "A hundred and sixty thousand dollars," she whispered.

"Holy *shit!*" the grasshopper said, his five eyes bulging. "That's fucking crazy!"

"Who at this wedding do you think is most likely to have cocaine?" the ant said. "The cockroach?"

The grasshopper looked around. "Yeah," he said. "The cockroach."

And so the ant marched over to the cockroach, and, while he didn't have cocaine, he did have pills.

The grasshopper wasn't sure what the moral of the story was. It wasn't "Work hard," obviously, but it wasn't quite "Be lazy," either. After all, it's not like the grasshopper's life had turned out great. Recently, he'd discovered a weird spot on his thorax, and because he had no health insurance he just went online for a few minutes and self-diagnosed it as molting, and, though that's probably what it was, what if it wasn't?

The truth was that all his friends were struggling. The cricket's band had broken up. The moth had been drawn in by crypto and lost everything. The caterpillar had become so insecure because of Instagram that she'd undergone a total metamorphosis, enlarging her wings to the point where she looked totally insane. The bee had moved into a super-remote hive in the country, and, while he claimed it was a commune, it was obviously some kind of cult. He called the leader his queen, and himself a drone, and the whole thing just sounded like a Netflix documentary waiting to happen.

Their generation had been spawned with such high hopes and expectations. They were supposed to change the world. Where had they gone wrong?

The grasshopper was thinking about leaving the reception early when he saw the ant shuffling toward him. He could tell the cockroach's pills had kicked in. Her exoskeleton was slick with sweat, and her stinger was twitching in time with Bruno Mars.

"Let's dance," she slurred.

The grasshopper wasn't in the mood, but when he started to say no she jammed a pill in his mouth. He tried to spit it out, but it dissolved on his tongue instantly.

"What was that?" said the grasshopper.

"We'll see, motherfucker!" said the ant, cackling.

The grasshopper was freaked out, but also intrigued. The ant was shaking her thorax at him now, beckoning him closer with her pincers. He'd had a thing for her since they were hatchlings, but it had never occurred to him to do anything about it. He told himself it was because he had no chance, but maybe he'd just been lazy?

Some older fleas were staring, but the grasshopper ignored them and followed the ant onto the dance floor, the music pulsing in his ears. Before long, he was spinning her around by the abdomen, his four wings fluttering out so wide they enveloped them completely, and all they could see was each other.

They woke up in the grasshopper's nest in Bed-Stuy, their twelve limbs twisted in a sweaty knot. They awkwardly untied themselves, unsure what to say. They knew they weren't right for each other. It wasn't their mismatched personalities and genitals so much as their dim prospects for the future. If they got together, they'd probably never be able to have offspring, or savings beyond what they could store in their digestive tracts. They weren't young anymore; they had to think about these things. Still, when the grasshopper suggested breakfast, the ant said yes.

They ate standing up in the grasshopper's messy kitchenette, then kissed tentatively, brushing each other gently with their feelers. The ant rested her head on the grasshopper's abdomen, and he stroked her antennae as the sun shone through his tiny window.

They had sex again, took a nap, ate some fruit, and watched a movie. Then they decided to go out, not to anyplace in particular, just sort of around. And as they inched across the vast sidewalk, where the bike racks loomed so tall they seemed to touch the sky, the moral of the story finally dawned on them: they were just bugs. They always had been. They had no control over the world. They had no control over their own lives. All they had was each other, and not for very long. They reached for each other's pincers. It was summer again, and this time they weren't about to waste it. ♦

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A REPORTER AT LARGE

DO NO HARM

Oregon tried a more humane way to address addiction. Then came the backlash.

BY E. TAMMY KIM

Activists argue that keeping drug users safe is more effective than arresting them.

In the early months of the pandemic, joggers on the Bear Creek Greenway, in southern Oregon, began to notice tents cropping up by the path. The Greenway, which connects towns and parks along a tributary of the Rogue River, was beloved for its wetlands and for stands of oaks that attracted migrating birds. Now, as jobs disappeared and services for the poor shut down, it was increasingly a last-ditch place to live. Tents accumulated in messy clusters, where people sometimes smoked fentanyl, and "the Greenway" became a byword for homelessness and drug use. On a popular local Facebook page, one typical comment read, "Though I feel sorry for some of the people in that situation, most of them are just pigs." In Medford, the largest city along the trail, police demolished encampments and ticketed people for sleeping rough.

One September evening in Medford, a white cargo van belonging to a nonprofit called Stabbin Wagon parked near the Greenway, between an auto-repair shop and a Wendy's. For unhoused people across Oregon, cargo vans have become a symbol of help. Some contain primary-care clinics and food pantries. Others, like Stabbin Wagon's, distribute a more controversial kind of aid: safe supplies for drug users.

Stabbin Wagon's director, Melissa Jones, pulsed with nervous energy, and wore flip-flops and a T-shirt that read "Nothing ends homelessness like housing." With her was Samantha Strong, a young activist with a green buzz cut and piercings. The two women—Stabbin Wagon's only employees—opened the van's doors to reveal plastic bins and hanging compartments of inventory, neatly arranged and all free. There were boxes of naloxone, needles of various gauges, cookers, pipes, fentanyl test strips, soap, and hand sanitizer.

People arrived on foot, by bike, and by car. Jones and Strong greeted them fondly, mostly by name. A young woman with a distant expression brought her little dog; they'd been living on the Greenway for years. A middle-aged guy who looked dressed for a hike called out his desired items like a food order. Strong assured a skittish first-time visitor, "You don't have to sign in. No, I don't need to see your I.D."

Harm reduction of this kind—providing drug users with supplies to prevent death and disease—has been practiced for decades. In this part of the country, though, it is newly prominent. In November, 2020, Oregon launched a historic experiment: the Drug Decriminalization and Addiction Treatment Initiative, known as Measure 110. Approved by fifty-eight per cent of voters, it made Oregon the first state to decriminalize possessing small amounts of illicit drugs. It also funnelled hundreds of millions of cannabis-tax dollars toward addiction treatment, housing, peer support, and harm reduction. A citizen panel that included people with "lived experience"—histories of substance use—would decide how the money was spent. Programs in Black, Native, and other "historically underserved" communities would be prioritized. The law's overarching goal, according to Tera Hurst, the director of the Health Justice Recovery Alliance, was to force "a shift in attitude toward people who use drugs and how we treat them."

Measure 110 was inspired by a sense of desperation: the drug war had failed, and policing wasn't curing people. In 2020, Oregon had the second-highest rate of drug addiction in the country, yet it ranked nearly last in access to treatment. Fentanyl was flooding in and being used alongside methamphetamine—becoming so prevalent that people expressed nostalgia for black-tar heroin, which seemed "bougie" by contrast. From 2019 to 2020, opioid-overdose deaths in Oregon increased nearly seventy per cent, and they have continued to rise.

Stabbin Wagon formed a few months before Measure 110 was passed. At the time, Jones was raising a teen-age son, running a resale business, and volunteering with a mutual-aid effort that served free lunches in Medford's Hawthorne Park. Many of the people she met there were using alcohol and drugs, and those who wanted to enter rehab faced long waits and bureaucratic hassles. Jones, who is in long-term recovery from alcohol use, reasoned that she could at least help them stay alive. "I dove into serious self-education about harm reduction," she said. "The more I learned, I was, like, 'Oh, my God, this is the op-

PHOTOGRAPH BY RIAN DUNDON

posite of what we're taught in recovery.'" Rather than trying to force abstinence, harm reduction works to "meet people where they are." Its proponents advocate a basic rule—never use alone—and provide access to safe supplies. With the growing popularity of highly potent opioids, harm reductionists have focussed on distributing naloxone, the "Lazarus drug," to reverse overdoses.

The approach took off early in the AIDS crisis, when activists shared the disinfection slogan "bleach and teach" and risked jail time to hand out clean needles. A large body of evidence now supports the idea that it saves lives. Syringe programs halve the spread of H.I.V. and hepatitis C; naloxone, when distributed to users and their peers, can cut overdose deaths by more than forty per cent.

But practitioners in small towns and rural areas tend to keep their work quiet, to avoid being accused of enabling drug use. Jones decided to be loud about it. In Hawthorne Park, she went tent to tent with a blue IKEA bag laden with naloxone and syringes. That was how her organization got its name, she said: "They were, like, 'Oh, it's the stabbin' wagon.' I thought it was funny and cute."

After Measure 110 passed, a friend suggested to Jones that it might fund an upstart organization like hers. She applied, and Stabbin Wagon was eventually granted nearly six hundred thousand dollars—enough to buy the cargo van and to fill it with supplies. "I thought, after I got the 110 money, it would solve all my problems," she said. Instead, Stabbin Wagon became a local flash point in the statewide debate over Measure 110. People blamed the law for an uptick in public drug use. Billionaire donors helped launch a repeal effort. Southern Oregon First, a "patriot" media group known for supporting the Three Percenters militia, made Jones and Stabbin Wagon a frequent target, saying that their work "creates all these piles of needles in our parks" and "keeps people addicted."

As the sun began to set over the Greenway, an orange Camaro with tinted windows drove up to where Jones and Strong were working and lingered awhile before zooming off. Strong guessed that it was one of the right-wing activists who'd been harassing them online. "I'm not scared of them," she told me afterward. "Complaining about people using drugs or being homeless—they're upset about stuff that's happening anyway. It just wasn't in their face."

Portland—Oregon's largest city, and one of its most liberal and diverse—voted overwhelmingly in favor of Measure 110, but in Medford the politics were more complicated. The city has about eighty-six thousand residents, most of them white; it is the seat of Jackson County, which is split politically, tilting Republican. During the national protests that followed the killing of George Floyd, hundreds of people wound through Medford, yelling, "Black lives matter." Jones was among them, and said that white supremacists came out to heckle the protesters. The scene was even more fraught in Grants Pass, one county over, where armed counter-protesters assembled under a giant American flag.

People working in recovery were used to navigating these political divides. Everybody in Jackson County seemed to know someone who'd lost a job, a home, child custody, or a loved one to drugs. Sommer Wolcott, the executive director of OnTrack, a treatment-and-housing nonprofit in southern Oregon, told me, "We're all in this work for a reason." Wolcott is an equable type with cropped dark hair and a preference for business-casual attire, which in the Pacific Northwest qualifies as formal wear. After studying psychology in college, she managed a locked institution for minors, many of whom had endured traumatic childhoods with severely addicted parents. "I saw kids who didn't have somebody who was safe," Wolcott said. Later, she worked with adults, and realized that she was treating the people her young clients might have become.

Addiction is a disease with no single cure. Those seeking relief must navigate a twisty, spotty "continuum of care." There's detox and transitional housing; residential and outpatient rehabilitation; peer support, meetings, and sponsors; counselling of all kinds; and medications such as methadone and buprenorphine. To coördinate services, Measure 110 required grantees to form a behavioral-health resource network, or BHRN (pronounced "burn"), in each county.

In Jackson County, a consortium of seventeen providers, including the public-health department, requested funding, and Wolcott helped guide the application. In her view, the biggest gaps in the system were medical: detox and inpatient rehabilitation. Measure 110, however, prioritized services that Medicaid didn't cover, such as harm reduction, housing, employment assistance, and peer support. As she worked on the application, she tuned in to meetings of the citizen panel that made funding decisions, the Oversight and Accountability Council. "The way they talked about treatment agencies was very disrespectful," she said. "We know harm reduction's effective, but it's an effective part of the continuum. You need to have the whole thing."

One former member of the O.A.C. described traditional treatment providers to me as "shame-based"; a current member said that inpatient treatment "has very shaky outcome metrics." Still, a great deal of money went to detox facilities and to groups that provide inpatient treatment. Wolcott's consortium was granted nearly seventeen million dollars. But the Oregon Health Authority announced that the county BHRN would have to accommodate another member: Stabbin Wagon. Reactions ranged from annoyance to disbelief. Even some harm reductionists told me that Jones was giving the approach a bad name. Her voice-mail greeting started with a sweetly intoned "Hey, fuckers." On TikTok, she posted videos that trolled conservatives. One showed Stabbin Wagon giving out naloxone at a drag show, set to a techno track with the lyric "The drugs are working."

Jones had her own feelings about joining the BHRN. The local providers were run by professionals who collaborated with city hall and used terms like "pathways to desirable solutions." Jones dismissed them as the "nonprofit industrial complex" and questioned their methods, including mandatory urine tests, which she considered inaccurate and degrading. "Twelve-step, abstinence-based programs didn't work for me," she said. "I didn't find stability that way or healthiness and happiness."

As a matter of style, Stabbin Wagon seemed more of a piece with Portland, New York, San Francisco, or Vancouver, where harm reduction is embedded in public policy. Last summer, I visited

Vancouver, whose Downtown Eastside neighborhood is both a model of harm reduction and a public bogeyman. At the office of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, I met with an Indigenous harm-reduction leader and watched people inject opioids under the supervision of a peer. Since 2016, British Columbia's Ministry of Health has permitted safe-consumption sites, funded alerts for dangerous batches of street drugs, and empowered doctors to prescribe pharmaceutical-grade fentanyl and meth. This has not put an end to overdoses—2023 was particularly deadly—but it has likely saved lives. On a Sunday evening, I followed a team of firefighters as they responded to opioid-related calls, hauling oxygen tanks up the stairs of dim S.R.O.s. A few times, they prepared to administer naloxone, but found that a friend of the person overdosing had already done it.

Vancouver's program was backed by extensive research, but it was too radical for just about anywhere in the U.S. "I do not believe the state of Oregon is ready for safe-consumption centers," Floyd Prozanski, a state senator who represents Eugene, told me. In Jackson County, many politicians and traditional providers feared that Stabbin Wagon was a forerunner of such methods. They were willing to tolerate harm reduction—the county itself operated a limited syringe exchange—but only to a point. Before Stabbin Wagon came along, a supporter of the group told me, "people were apologizing for having to do harm reduction—they were maintaining the status quo."

Outside Stabbin Wagon's van near the Greenway, a lanky woman in jean shorts pulled Jones aside. In a whisper, she explained that the Medford police had come to her tent and taken her belongings. She'd lost prescription medication, among other things. "I'm so sorry," Jones said. "The police used to send notice of sweeps, but now they're immediate." She told the woman that she'd look into locating her stuff.

In the spring of 2021, Medford passed a strict anti-camping ordinance, meant to remove homeless people from view. Officers started giving people seventy-two hours' notice to evacuate, under threat of arrest. The city's shelters were full, though, and Jones was furious. During a city-council discussion about the homeless, she said, "None of you give a shit," before her microphone was muted. The police soon mounted a sweep of a large tent community on the Greenway, and in the coming months hundreds more people were forced out. With tents forbidden, some resorted to sleeping in the open, and on one frigid morning that December a young man named Manuel Barboza-Valerio was found dead, apparently of hypothermia. "We're responsible for this," a city-council member said afterward. "Manny's death is on us." Still, the sweeps continued.

Jones is a self-described police abolitionist, who argues that law enforcement should be barred from responding to substance use. Her view is informed by the recent history of police in southern Oregon. A decade ago, the former sheriff of Josephine County was reportedly involved with the Oath Keepers and local militias. In 2019, Medford police and the Jackson County Sheriff's Office were accused of mistreating a paraplegic man during his arrest: county-jail employees had stripped and slapped him. (Lawsuits stemming from the incident are pending; neither Medford nor Jackson County would comment.)

At events, Stabbin Wagon hands out stickers reading "ACAB" ("All cops are bastards"); online, it shares footage of police using backhoes to clear homeless people's belongings. Other videos have shown outreach workers from fellow BHRN providers, which has stoked resentment. "A lot of people don't know these organizations work with the police," Strong explained. "When we post about that, people can be, like, 'O.K., now I can make a decision about whether to access their services.'"

Strong told me that Jones's assertiveness had attracted both allies and enemies: "While it's a blessing for people who are, like, 'Fuck the cops,' it also isolates you." In Medford, law enforcement is tightly linked to city hall. The mayor is a former police chief, and one of the council members is a corrections officer. Local officials rely heavily on Rogue Retreat, a charity that receives public funds to run an indoor shelter, a sanctioned tent site, and a tract of tiny houses—some of the only facilities for homeless people in the area. When Jones heard allegations that the director, a pastor, advocated for gay conversion therapy, she joined an effort to expose him, and he was subsequently fired. (He denies pushing the therapy.) Then, last August, Stabbin Wagon hosted an "H.I.V. testing party" and the police came looking for one of the participants, who they said was a teen-age runaway. Jones and Strong yelled in protest, and were arrested for harassment and interfering with an officer. (Strong later resigned from Stabbin Wagon, in part because of that experience; Strong and Jones have ongoing criminal cases.)

While Stabbin Wagon and its allies praised Measure 110 for limiting the role of law enforcement in fighting addiction, the Medford police felt unfairly constrained. At headquarters, I met Richard Josephson, an officer of twenty-three years, who wore jeans and a short-sleeved shirt that revealed a mosaic of tattoos. From his desk, he reviewed surveillance video of a footbridge downtown, which appeared to show a man selling drugs and others taking them. "Users don't care anymore," he said. "I'll drive a police car up to them, and they don't even care." Josephson took a personal interest in drug enforcement and treatment. "I grew up in a drug house," he said. "My mom still uses meth. I thought we were camping one summer, but we were just homeless."

In September, 2019, the police department established a Livability Team to patrol downtown and the Greenway, addressing "concerns such as homelessness and chronic nuisance houses." Josephson, who helps lead the team, told me he liked that it had "this whole social-services side." Officers sometimes patrol the parks along with outreach workers, who hand out phone numbers for treatment centers and emergency shelters. But police also arrest unhoused people for trespassing and evict them from tents.

What they don't do much is apprehend people for drugs. Measure 110 forbade police to arrest someone for carrying small amounts of fentanyl, meth, or crack, or for consuming those drugs in public. Instead, they were supposed to issue a ticket that requires the person to either pay a hundred-dollar fine or call a statewide hotline to discuss treatment options.

In the three years before Measure 110 took effect, the Medford police made more than forty-seven hundred arrests on drug charges. In a similar period afterward, they issued approximately fifteen hundred citations for minor possession and made some two thousand arrests for higher-level possession and dealing. The lower total was caused partly by less intensive policing during the pandemic and partly by a lack of interest in ticketing drug users. "There's no consequences to the hundred-dollar ticket," Josephson complained. "They can't pay the fine. What's the point?"

One goal of decriminalization was to replace police with peer-support workers. Wolcott considered this misguided and naïve. Drug users need "external motivators" in order to change their lives, she said. Josephson, too, argued that people who might have detoxed in jail and opted for treatment were instead languishing on the streets. At a taco truck downtown, he pointed out a woman he'd arrested on possession charges who was now clean and working for a charity.

There are certainly many Oregonians who attribute their recovery to the criminal-justice system. In Grants Pass, I visited tent encampments with a peer-outreach worker who had been arrested multiple times during her addiction; a decal on her car read "#drugcourtssavelives." But just as many people told me that their drug use got worse in jail. "I was incarcerated because of my substance use," Brendon Kinzel, who until recently worked at Medford's Family Nurturing Center, said. "Jail didn't change me." The county jail, in any case, was overcrowded, and there was a statewide shortage of public defenders.

A criminal record entails its own obstacles to recovery: debt, stigma, exclusion from work and housing. In Portland, I visited the Miracles Club, a nonprofit that primarily serves African Americans. It was hosting a clinic on an Oregon law that allows certain convictions to be expunged. At one table, a lawyer named Emilie Junge sat with a client, helping him fill out paperwork. "I deal with people every day who have long criminal records, and they want to talk about their drug arrests—they're clearly traumatized," Junge told me. "If Measure 110 has done anything, it's to stop that."

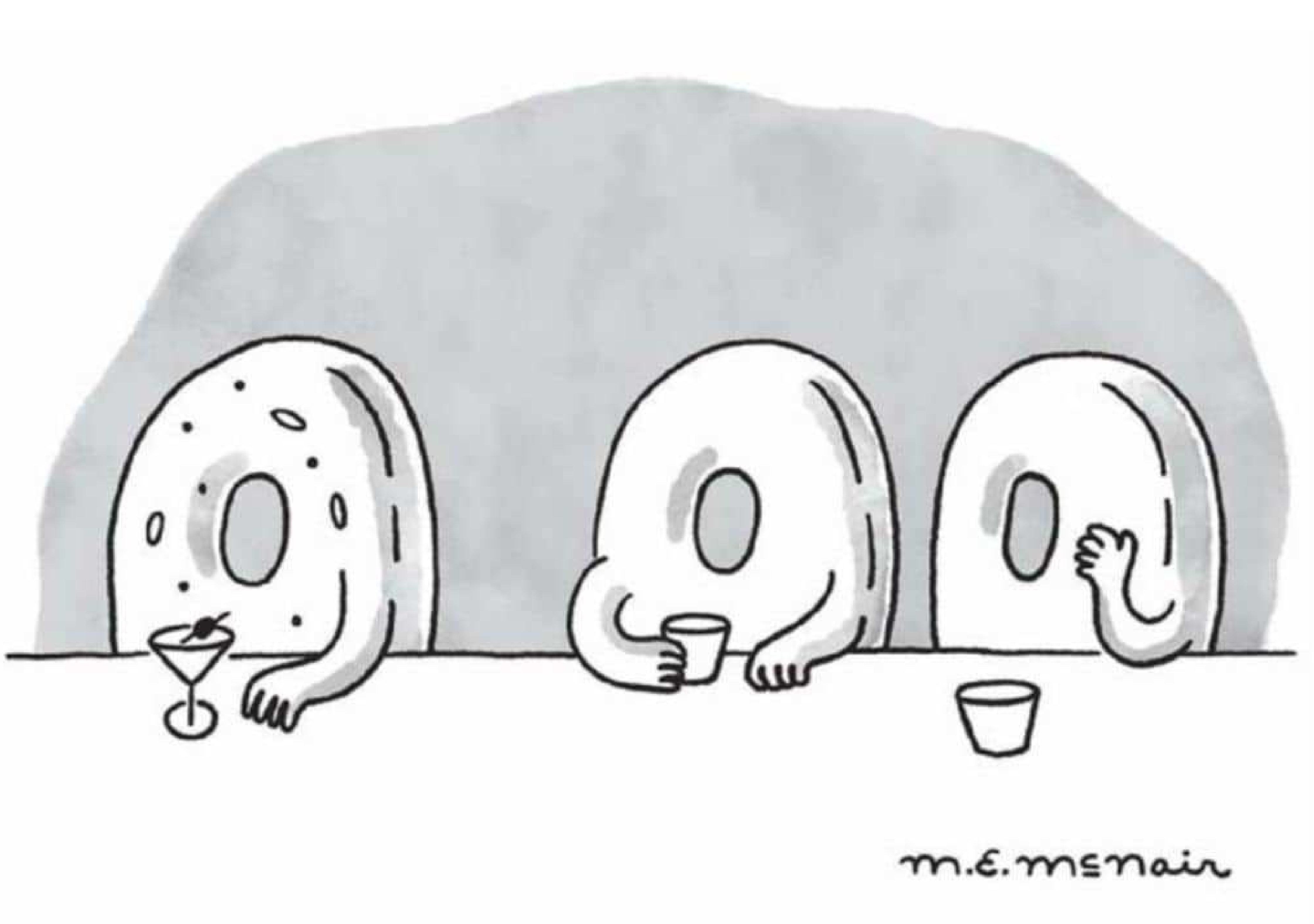
To mark International Overdose Awareness Day, late last summer, a resource fair and vigil was held in Hawthorne Park. Amid a ring of informational tables was a homespun memorial: a bulletin board marked "We Remember," covered with handwritten notes. A video of dead family members played on a loop. The host of the event was Max's Mission, a nonprofit run by Julia Pinsky, a former publicist. A decade ago, Pinsky's son Max started taking oxycodone after a car accident. Less than two years later, he died of a heroin overdose.

On an elevated stage, Pinsky's husband and daughter demonstrated how to administer naloxone: spray into nose, breathe into mouth, wait. Many people gave testimonies of mourning and recovery. "I lived on the Greenway for three years," a woman named Crystal said. "Fentanyl is a pandemic." An employee talked about naloxone kits funded by Measure 110, which Max's Mission had used to reverse more than a thousand overdoses. Yet when Pinsky's husband told the crowd to call local legislators to support the law, only a few people clapped.

Many Oregonians saw Measure 110 as responsible for an increase in public disorder, drug use, and overdose deaths—which leaped from seven hundred and thirty-seven in 2021 to nine hundred and fifty-five in 2022. In fact, a recent study by N.Y.U. found "no evidence of an association" between decriminalization and fatal-overdose rates in Oregon and Washington. The drugs in circulation were unusually lethal—and given that being arrested can actually increase the risk of overdose, the authors wrote, Measure 110 might help to alleviate the problem. But if users couldn't be picked up off the street, their activities became far more visible. "People's patience is wearing thin," Haven Wheelock, who manages the harm-reduction program at Outside In, in Portland, said. "I don't want to downplay the moral injury of seeing such poverty and despair."

In Medford, complaints about drug use overlapped with complaints about homelessness. "I don't feel safe walking around at night—and I'm from Baltimore," Alyssa Bartholomew, a public defender, told me. "Hawthorne Park used to be my kids' playground. Now there are needles and people who are homeless." During the spring and summer, residents asked officials at town halls how they planned to handle people "who don't want help" and called for more aggressive prosecution of "homeless who vandalize and destroy property." Eventually, the city council passed a resolution condemning Measure 110. Harm reduction, it said, had done "nothing to help individuals overcome their addictions," and had caused drug paraphernalia to proliferate in public places.

The backlash reflected broader anxieties about Measure 110. In many places, the law had funded fledgling groups and encouraged existing providers to do work that they'd never done before; about half the grantees were either brand new or very small. To incumbents, this



"The guy has three sesame seeds and six poppy seeds and he thinks he can call himself an everything bagel."

looked like folly. Andy Mendenhall, a physician and the head of Central City Concern, a large nonprofit in Portland, criticized the rollout of the law for "prioritizing the voices of individuals who did not have operational experience."

In Medford, it didn't help that the Oregon Health Authority awarded Stabbin Wagon $1.5 million, on top of the Measure 110 money, to build a peer-respite center—a facility that offers people in acute mental distress a quiet place to sleep, bathe, eat, and talk to someone understanding. When O.H.A. announced the grant, last year, other nonprofits expressed dismay. According to e-mails published by Sam Becker, an independent reporter, Medford's city manager wrote to a lobbyist, "All of the legitimate non-profits in our area are outraged that [Jones] is getting any funding."

Lori Paris, the director of a large treatment agency called Addictions Recovery Center, told the Medford police chief, "Everyone is in shock over this." She accused Stabbin Wagon of planning to "create a safe injection site" at the respite center. (Jones denied this.) The police chief asked what he could do to stop Stabbin Wagon from getting funded, and Paris gave him contacts at O.H.A.

Wolcott seemed almost pleased by the controversy. When the deputy police chief asked if she had heard about the grant, she responded, "Yep, O.H.A. did get an earful." She implied that news of the respite center would embarrass O.H.A. for funding a group that was out of its depth. "This could blow up into an interesting media sh*t show," she wrote. "If anything, giving her 1.5 million might help blow things up faster."

Throughout 2022 and 2023, there seemed to be a new op-ed or county resolution each week calling for Measure 110 to be repealed. "Did Measure 110 take away 'rock bottom'? Oregon cops seem to think so," KGW News proclaimed. It did not escape notice that almost no one used the hotline number that police were supposed to give drug users. In its first fifteen months, there were only a hundred and nineteen callers, at a cost that worked out to more than seven thousand dollars per conversation. A report by Oregon's secretary of state dryly noted, "It is unclear if the M110-specific hotline provides the best value."

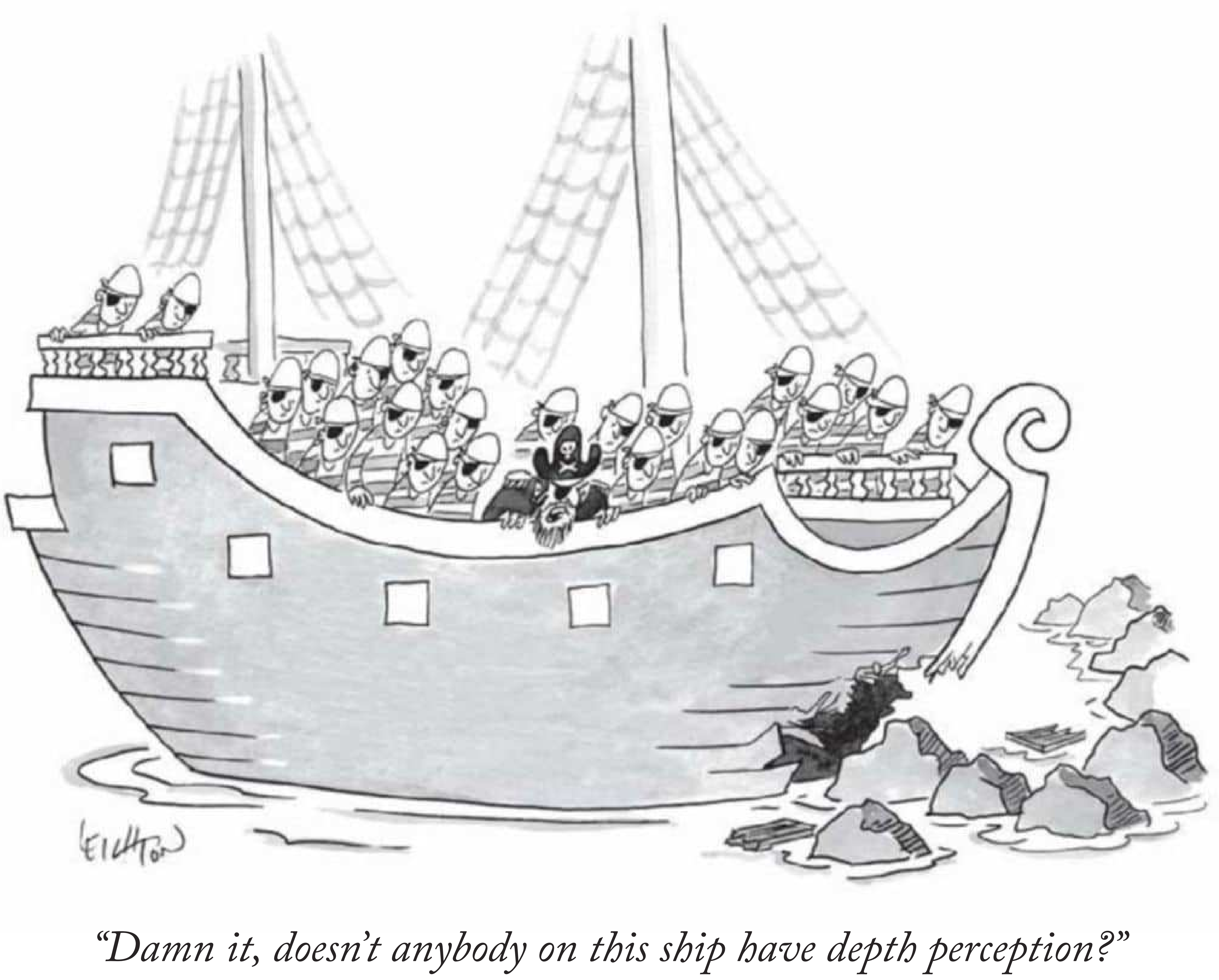
Legislators came under pressure to either reform the law or dismantle it. A group bankrolled by Phil Knight, the Nike co-founder, and by Tim Boyle, the C.E.O. of Columbia Sportswear, filed paperwork to gather signatures for a partial repeal. Max Williams, a former Republican legislator and corrections official who helps lead the effort, told me, "I don't think it should ever be the policy of a state to accept that people have a legitimate choice to use lethal drugs." In Portland, he said, "we've got an exodus of capital, a cratering out of the central city." Last June, the state recriminalized minor possession of fentanyl. Governor Tina Kotek, who had remained largely silent on Measure 110, recommended recriminalizing most drug possession and public use.

In December, a legislative committee on addiction and community safety held a hearing at the state capitol. Measure 110 was not intended to be the sole topic, but people were stirred up, and the hearing drew a crowd. Had everyone who signed up been allowed to speak, the session would have stretched into the night; as it was, it lasted four hours.

The critics of Measure 110 were polite but sharp-tongued. The mayor of Tigard, a Portland suburb, said that drug users had been locking themselves in public bathrooms and overdosing, which required the city to break open doors and then pay for costly repairs. Business groups said that people who were homeless, addicted, and mentally ill were ruining commerce. A woman named Juanita Swartwood complained about an irresistible flood of street drugs in her community. (Though the connection to Measure 110 was murky, Swartwood was one of the petitioners behind the repeal effort, and the committee gave her extra time to speak.) In the most affecting moment of her testimony, she held up a photo of her granddaughter Emily, a young woman with long blond hair. Measure 110, she said, had stopped the police from intervening when Emily was caught with drugs. It had taken months to persuade her to get counselling.

Supporters of the measure were clearly on the defensive. Julia Pinsky, of Max's Mission, drove in from Medford and explained that her son had overdosed after an "entanglement with law enforcement" prevented him from getting help. "Going back to punishing people for their addiction will cost lives, not save them," she said. Larry Turner, a founder of Fresh Out, a nonprofit that aids Black people with criminal records, said that the funding had helped increase his organization's capacity sixfold. He pleaded for patience: the war on drugs had been given fifty years. "It took us time to get here, it's going to take us time to get out," he said.

In fact, timing was one of the crucial problems with Measure 110. De-



"Damn it, doesn't anybody on this ship have depth perception?"

criminalization had gone into effect as soon as the law was enacted, in February, 2021—but, amid the pandemic, most of the grants weren't rolled out until late in 2022. There were long waiting lists for detox, inpatient rehabilitation, and transitional housing, which could take years to address. Harm reduction and peer outreach, on the other hand, were easy to ramp up quickly. What most Oregonians thus saw of Measure 110 were naloxone kits and syringes and volunteers handing out sandwiches in parks—which they linked, in their minds, to tent encampments and the acrid smell of fentanyl smoke.

The expansion of traditional services was harder to perceive. In the first year of funding, according to O.H.A., county BHRNs reported more than a hundred and fifty thousand interactions with people seeking treatment for substance use, and another hundred and fifty thousand with those accessing harm reduction. Billie Cartwright, a physician assistant with BestCare in the ski town of Bend, told me that she had voted against Measure 110 but now saw positive effects. "One of the things we changed is, anyone who walks in the door, we'll see that day," she said. A peer-support worker in her office had recently picked up a client from jail and brought him straight in for treatment.

Southeast of Portland, I visited a new men's home, on a tree-lined residential block, not far from a nature trail. Gabriel, one of the first residents, was a twentysomething sheet-metal worker recovering from a fentanyl relapse. Before he got a spot in the house, he said, "I was living in downtown Portland, in not a great place. I was seeing people using. I saw an overdose, a shooting. Two people died in my building during a three-month period. Here, I'm away from all that chaos."

In Jackson County, Stabbin Wagon was serving about a hundred and twenty people a month, with help from two new peer-support workers. O.H.A. agreed to extend Jones's funding, and finalized the contract for the respite center. Max's Mission expanded its naloxone distribution and dispensed aid in rural areas. The H.I.V. Alliance treated people for hepatitis C, provided addiction telemedicine, and covered rent payments to prevent evictions.

OnTrack spent its grant money on a row of bungalow-style apartments for pregnant women waiting to get into treatment, an emergency-lodging complex for single adults, and Spanish-speaking staff. "It's been a steep learning curve, because people are in such difficult circumstances—coming off the street, actively using, and trying to get a treatment bed," Wolcott said. Before Measure 110, the agency had served around three thousand clients a year, and that number had not budged, as people waited months for residential treatment. "What is increasing is low-barrier housing, the accessibility of outpatient, and the amount of support services," Wolcott said. "But it's not nearly as neat and tidy to report on."

The money distributed through Measure 110 was both a lot and not very much. A single round of residential addiction treatment runs to tens of thousands of dollars. A small sober-living house can cost hundreds of thousands to get up to code. Even setting aside Measure 110, Oregon is poised to spend some $1.5 billion on behavioral-health care between 2021 and 2025.

As Kate Lieber, the majority leader in the Oregon Senate and a former prosecutor, told me, Measure 110 was designed to be "like water, to fill the gaps around what Medicaid doesn't cover." But decriminalization turned out to be more unsettling than many imagined, and fentanyl continued to blast through the state. Still, as more services came online, I noticed calls for repeal being blunted by calls for reform; people wanted to restore aspects of the old enforcement model while keeping the focus on treatment. In Oregon and around the U.S., there was a grim sense that our systems were insufficient to cope with the threat of fentanyl. New York City opened two safe-consumption sites, and Vermont is considering a bill to decriminalize possession. Illinois eliminated cash bail and limited pretrial detention for people charged with low-level crimes. Seattle, though, went the other way: drug possession, which had been effectively decriminalized, was reclassified as a gross misdemeanor. Vancouver is also seeing a backlash.

In Medford, I visited Recovery Café, which offers support groups, counselling, and hot meals in an industrial-chic dining hall. At a chow line, volunteers served roast chicken with corn and potatoes. Some sixty attendees sat at tables, and a host with the vibe of a youth pastor invited them to share their accomplishments. People announced the number of days they had been sober, and thanked their higher power. Some spoke of new jobs, or of resuming contact with kids lost to child welfare.

Across the room, I noticed a tall, bearded guy who'd been at the vigil in Hawthorne Park. He introduced himself as Rocky, a roofer from the area. He had just finished an inpatient program at OnTrack, and was living in transitional housing with a few other men. His wife, Kerissa, with whom he'd long used fentanyl and meth, was also in treatment. In the worst of their addiction, they'd squatted in an abandoned house and signed over custody of two young sons. Rocky's parents died while he was in prison for drug trafficking. "That was a wakeup call," he said.

Many of their friends had died from overdoses; others had been revived with naloxone, which Rocky once used on Kerissa. This was their eighth collective attempt to get sober. When I caught up with them in mid-December, he told me that they'd found a new place to rent and were "working through stepwork with our sponsors." They saw a doctor affiliated with OnTrack for injections of buprenorphine, which helped them stay off opioids. Rocky had a job with a distributor of roofing materials. Kerissa was preparing for an interview at a sporting-goods store, and hoped that her criminal record wouldn't get in the way.

Recovery Café emphasizes the end goal of abstinence, and the staff I interviewed didn't have much to say about harm reduction. When I went, every visitor was required to have been free of all drugs and alcohol for at least twenty-four hours. But Recovery Café got funding from Measure 110, as did the other providers that helped Rocky and Kerissa. Recovery was messy, and the couple had needed different things at different times: medication to reverse an overdose, support from peers, a rehab center, a place to live and a way to pay for it. "You need to give these addicts a way to get clean, to get housing. You need stability," Rocky said. "We're in survival mode." ♦

LETTER FROM ISRAEL

HOSTAGES

As Benjamin Netanyahu clings to power, his country pays a price.

BY DAVID REMNICK

To be vigilant—to live without illusions about the ever-present threat of annihilation—was a primary value at No. 4 Haportzim Street, once the Jerusalem address of the Netanyahu family. This wariness had ancient roots. In the Passover Haggadah, the passage beginning "Vehi Sheamda" reminds everyone at the Seder table that in each generation an enemy "rises up to destroy" the Jewish people. "But the Holy One, Blessed be He, delivers us from their hands," the Haggadah continues. Benzion Netanyahu, the family patriarch and a historian of the Spanish Inquisition, was a secular man. For deliverance, he looked not to faith but to the renunciation of naïveté and the strength of arms. This creed became his middle son's inheritance, the core of his self-conception as the uniquely unillusioned defender of the State of Israel.

That son, Benjamin Netanyahu, is now in his sixth term as Prime Minister. Not even the state's founder, David Ben-Gurion, held power longer. But Netanyahu's standing in the polls is dismal. Now seventy-four, he always campaigned on security, presenting himself as the one statesman and patriot who saw through the malign intentions of Israel's enemies. Yet with the Hamas massacre of some twelve hundred people in southern Israel, on October 7th, he had presided over an unprecedented collapse of state security.

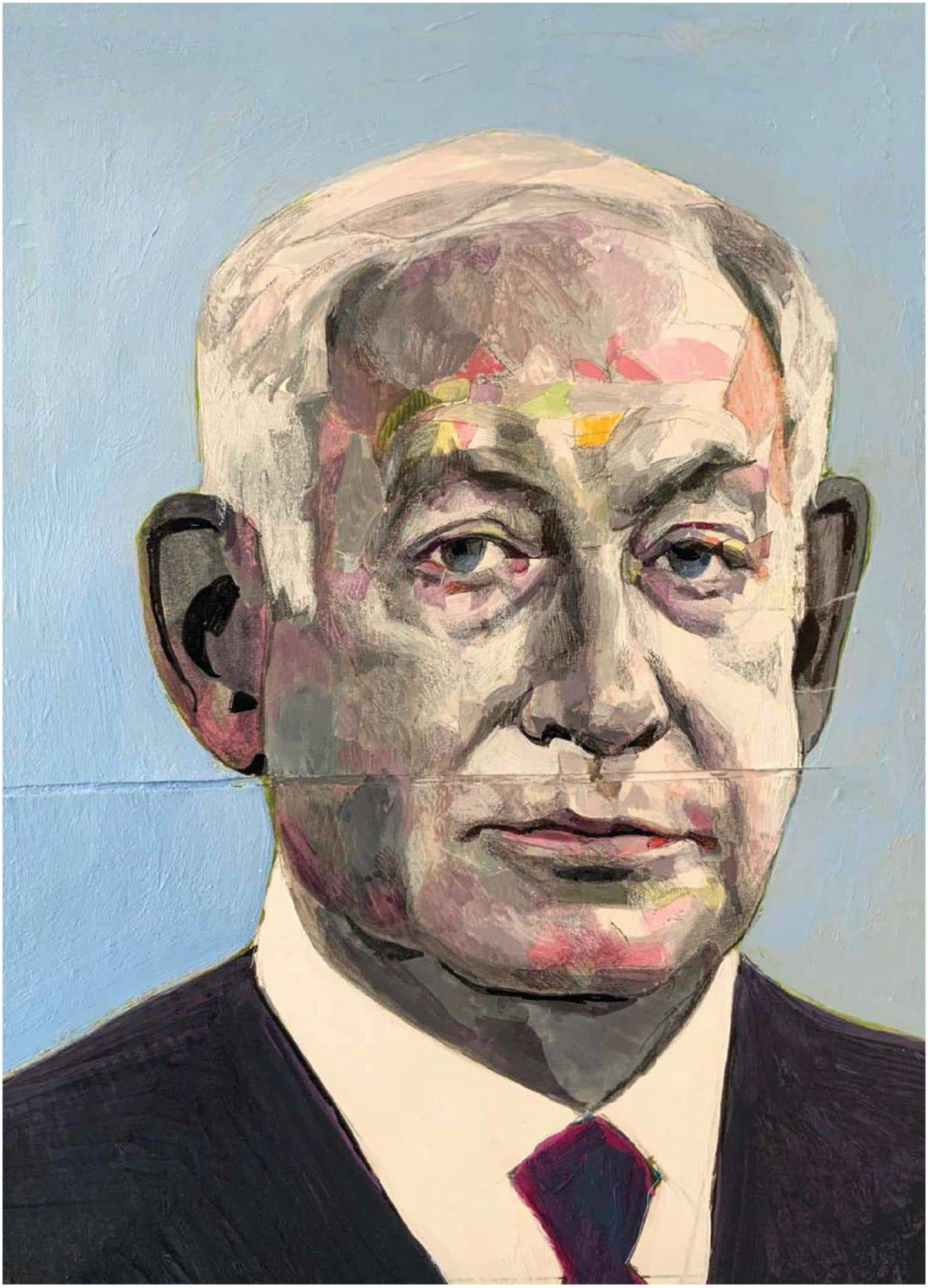
"Historically, Netanyahu will go down in history as the worst Jewish leader ever," Avraham Burg, a former speaker of the Knesset who long ago left the Labor Party and joined the leftist Hadash Party, told me. The fury at Netanyahu among centrists and many conservatives is scarcely less intense. Galit Distel Atbaryan, a hard-line minister in Netanyahu's government, resigned after October 7th; she later talked of her "burning anger" toward him. She was hesitant to attack Netanyahu during wartime, but, she told Israeli television, she herself had "sinned" for her own role in dividing Israeli society. When she woke on the morning of the seventh and heard the news of the catastrophic attack, her first thought was "You did this. You weakened the nation." Now, she said, "the days of this government are numbered—that's obvious." Naftali Bennett, a former Prime Minister, told me that Israel was experiencing a self-defeating level of division. "In the past year," he said, "Israel has been tearing itself apart and its immune system became weak. Our enemy saw that and attacked."

Since first gaining the Prime Minister's office, in 1996, Bibi, as everyone has called him since childhood, has been dismissive of any talk about the influence of his family—"psychobabble," he once described it to me with a disdainful wave of the hand. Yet the power of his father's guidance was never in doubt. When Benzion died, in 2012, at the age of a hundred and two, Netanyahu delivered a eulogy that directly addressed his father, and spoke to the centrality of his counsel: "You always told me that a necessary component for any living body—and a nation is a living body—is the ability to identify a danger in time, a quality that was lost to our people in exile; that is what you said. You taught me, Father, to look at reality head on, to understand what it holds and to come to the necessary conclusions."

Benzion was an acolyte of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the leader of the branch of right-wing Zionism known as Revisionism (what was being revised was a Zionist agenda deemed insufficiently militant), and it had been Jabotinsky who foresaw disaster befalling the Jews of Europe, which, in 1938, he likened to a "volcano which will soon begin to spew forth its fires of destruction." In the Revisionist view, the founding of Israel came, culpably, too late—too late for six million Jews. Like Jabotinsky, Benzion believed that Ben-Gurion and other mainstream Labor Zionists had been much too accommodating of the British, who ruled Mandate-era Palestine, and too willing to negotiate with the Arabs who lived there. "A nice end they are preparing for us," Benzion wrote in a Revisionist publication. "That end is an Arab state in the land of Israel." His view of the enemy did not admit much humanity. "The tendency to conflict is in the essence of the Arab," he told a reporter in 2009. "The goal of the Arabs of Israel is destruction. They do not deny that they want to destroy us."

Any departure from territorial maximalism was anathema to Benzion. His three sons—Yonatan, Bibi, and Iddo—could have been left in no doubt about where he stood. Ben-Gurion's acceptance of the U.N. partition plan, in 1947, dividing the land between the Jews and the Arabs, was intolerable. Benzion condemned his fellow-Revisionist Menachem Begin when, at Camp David, in 1978, Begin negotiated the return of the Sinai to Egypt, in what became an enduring peace agreement. The Oslo Accords, signed in the nineties by Yitzhak Rabin, were also an act of pathetic credulity. It was easy to imagine Benzion's response to Ehud Barak's negotiations with Palestinians over sovereignty, in 2000; Ariel Sharon's disengagement from Gaza, in 2005; and Ehud Olmert's proposal, in 2008, to create a demilitarized Palestinian state. Apparently, Benzion was even critical of his son's decision to share sovereignty with the Palestinians over the West Bank city of Hebron. No one was vigilant enough to escape his contempt. Benzion once remarked that his son might make a fine foreign minister. Netanyahu was the country's Prime Minister at the time.

When I visited Israel late last month, the first thing I noticed was that the surface hustle of daily life was back. In the first few weeks after October 7th, during my previous visit,



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Disavowing blame for October 7th, Netanyahu "has an interest in never finishing this stage of war," an Israeli critic says.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREA VENTURA

GUARANTEED
HOW TO HAVE LONG, LUSCIOUS HAIR
IN TWO EASY STEPS
① HAVE SHORT, LUSCIOUS HAIR.
② DON'T CUT IT.
-DGR-

Israel was all but shut down; as hundreds of thousands of reservists left work and home to report for duty, schools and businesses closed, and the roads were empty. Now everything is open and the roads are full.

But nothing is normal. Ask someone "*Ma shlomcha*?" ("How are you?") and you will get a long silence or a sigh, as if to say, "Are you really asking?" Then comes a wounded reply. People are quick to recount the nightmare they'd just had or the day's gnawing anxiety. "I have dreams that Hamas is at my door." "We all know someone—or we all know someone who knows someone—who was killed or at war." And then you hear plaintive expressions of a lost sense of security: "We are no longer Israeli, we are Jewish."

In cars and kitchens, people tune in to the hourly newscasts on the radio, which invariably begin with necrology: short biographies of fallen soldiers. Then come the reports of the Army's progress in Gaza, tunnels discovered, Hamas fighters killed, cross-border violence in the northern Galilee with Hezbollah, bombing raids on Iranian-backed militias in Syria, Houthi attacks on Israeli ships in the Red Sea. The news on television carries panel discussions with generals, intelligence officers, government officials. Are Netanyahu and President Biden starting to diverge? And what the hell is happening on American campuses?

Netanyahu usually works out of a surprisingly shabby office complex in central Jerusalem, but these days he is mostly holed up in the Kirya, a defense compound in Tel Aviv, where he leads a five-member war council. Three of the other four members have little love for Netanyahu and would be happy to see him replaced: the defense minister, Yoav Gallant, whom he temporarily fired last year; Benny Gantz, a former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces and a potential challenger, who is running ahead of Netanyahu in the polls by almost two to one; and Gadi Eisenkot, another former I.D.F. chief of staff and potential challenger, whose connection with the Israeli public deepened when his son died in the fighting in Gaza recently. Then, there's Ron Dermer, an American-born political adviser and loyalist whose father and brother were both mayors of Miami Beach.

Netanyahu and Dermer are comfortable in the folkways of American Republicanism. Dermer is sometimes known as "Netanyahu's brain" and, like his patron, believes that American Presidents (Barack Obama perhaps most of all) tend to be mistily deluded about the intentions of Palestinians, Hezbollah, and, crucially, the Iranians. Biden, like so many of his predecessors, has a tortured history with Netanyahu, whom he has sometimes found to be self-righteous, condescending, and deceptive. Although Biden initially embraced Netanyahu after October 7th—and displayed so much empathy for Israelis that many people here were heard to say they wished *he* were their Prime Minister—Netanyahu has since shown cavalier disdain for American efforts to minimize the horrific bloodshed and destruction throughout Gaza, prevent a second front in the north, and convey support for the prospect of two states.

At the Kirya, Netanyahu daily confronts the subject of the hostages in Gaza. Somehow, the hunger to bring them home is an expression of Israel's basic purpose: to protect a people who had nearly been eradicated. Among the many accusations being levelled at Netanyahu is that he failed a test of basic humanity when he did not immediately and publicly connect with the families of the hostages. (The Prime Minister's office maintains that Netanyahu was supportive of the hostage families from the start.) His more recent attempts at empathy have proved, to many, utterly unconvincing. Recently, at a televised press conference, a reporter from *Israel Hayom* (*Israel Today*), a newspaper established in 2007 by the American casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson to support Netanyahu, asked the Prime Minister if he wore the "Bring Them Home" dog tags that are ubiquitous now in Israel. At a tense earlier meeting with former hostages and their families, Netanyahu had to explain that he had left his dog tag by his bed. One parent was having none of it: "You don't put it on your neck because you're ashamed." Now, on cue, he fished out the dog tag he was wearing and displayed it to the cameras.

What is not especially visible on Israeli television is the unrelenting horror of Palestinian suffering in Gaza, where more than twenty-three thousand people have been killed in three months, and an estimated 1.9 million have been displaced. Only rarely do Israelis see what the rest of the world sees: the corpses of Palestinian children wrapped in sheets by a mass grave; widespread hunger and disease; schools and houses, apartment blocks and mosques, reduced to rubble; people fleeing from one place to the next, on foot, on donkey carts, three to a bicycle, all the time knowing that there is no real refuge from mortal danger. Gaza is a presence on Israeli television mainly through the dispatches of reporters embedded with the I.D.F. And they tend to emphasize the experience of Israeli soldiers—their missions, their clashes with Hamas fighters, the search for hostages, the crisp pronouncements of generals and officials helicoptering in from Jerusalem.

A disregard for the suffering in Gaza is hardly limited to reactionary ministers or far-right commentators. Ben Caspit, the author of a biography critical of Netanyahu, recently posted that he felt no compunction about concentrating on the home front. “Why should we turn our attention [to Gaza]?” he wrote. “They’ve earned that hell fairly, and I don’t have a milligram of empathy.” When I asked Caspit about this, he replied that he was “pro-humanitarian aid” and a lifelong “peacenik,” but insisted that there had been, until October 7th, a “ceasefire” with Hamas. And then, he said, they “crossed the border, came to our villages to loot, to rape, to kill, and to kidnap. So, as an Israeli, it’s difficult for me to feel sorry now during this war while we are going on burying five and seven soldiers a day.” He did not care about Gaza in “exactly the same way that the British did not care about the Germans in World War Two and the Americans about the Japanese,” he went on. “We were forced into this situation. We did not initiate it. On the contrary, we initiated peace.” His is a common sentiment among Israelis.

“You do see Gaza on TV, but not enough,” Ilana Dayan, the longtime host of “Uvda” (“Fact”), a kind of Israeli “60 Minutes,” told me one evening over coffee in Tel Aviv. Dayan, who has aired countless reports critical of the Israeli government and military, allowed that a patriotic tone has overtaken much of what appears on the air. “And when I come home and I say, ‘We have to know more,’ it’s hard for them to care. We know our audiences are impatient with any kind of deviation from the mainstream. We interview people about October 7th—we are stuck on October 7th—and, after those atrocities, we too often, understandably, lack the empathy to see what is happening on the other side of the border. As an Israeli, I felt so, too. As a reporter, I feel that we have to tell Israelis about the price being paid in Gaza.”

When Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up twenty per cent of the population, voice their political sentiments on social media, the result can be harassment, doxing, or even a visit from the authorities. Many are repulsed by what they are seeing on Israeli television, in the light of what has appeared on media outlets based in the Arab world. “I can’t stomach it,” Diana Buttu, a human-rights lawyer who was once a negotiator for the Palestine Liberation Organization, told me. She lives in Haifa, a mixed city on the northern coast. “Palestinians are so dehumanized. They are not people. There is no sense of what it means that twenty thousand are dead, half of them kids. It’s only ‘We have to get Hamas.’ My neighbors in Haifa don’t see or comprehend what is being done in their name.”

Palestinian citizens of Israel are required to negotiate an enormously complicated identity. They are physicians, nurses, teachers, and workers who speak Hebrew as well as Arabic and are integrated into Israeli life, and yet they also live among ghosts, villages and towns that were once Palestinian and are now Israeli. In times of crisis, Jewish Israelis often regard them with suspicion. Who are they first? Loyal Israeli citizens or Palestinian nationalists? Hassan Jabareen, the founder and director of Adalah, a human-rights organization that takes up legal cases in defense of Palestinian Israelis, also lives in Haifa, and he told me this was the first time that the Israeli police have barred antiwar demonstrations since the Oslo Accords. His community “doesn’t feel now that they have second-class citizenship,” he said. “No, now it is almost like occupation *within* Israel. We are treated as enemies.”

One statistic that disturbs many Jewish Israelis appeared in a recent survey conducted by Khalil Shikaki, the head of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. His poll found that seventy-two per cent of respondents in the West Bank and Gaza believe that Hamas was “correct” to launch its terror attack. Just ten per cent said that Hamas had committed war crimes. The majority said they had not seen videos of Hamas fighters on their rampage—the very sort of evidence of shooting, looting, and butchery ubiquitous in the Israeli media and in social-media feeds.

Among Palestinians, particularly in the West Bank and Gaza, there is a distinct reluctance to talk about, much less condemn, the massacre of October 7th. Because so many of them have come to disbelieve anything Israeli officials say, there is a reflex to discount reports of atrocities or hostage testimonies. As always in this century-long conflict, multiple truths—the Hamas massacre and the Israeli bombardment; the instances of horrific rape by Hamas combatants in southern Israel and the killing of thousands of children in Gaza; Hamas’s eliminationist ideology and Israel’s irreconcilable condition of being both an occupier and a democratic state—cannot be taken in all at once. To deal with every historical episode and contradiction, every cruelty, would be to complicate one’s loyalties to the breaking point.

Mustafa Barghouti, an independent politician in the West Bank, told me he feels “sad for every person killed, Israeli or Palestinian,” but insisted that the Western world was “talking only about Israelis," and rarely Palestinians. "Hamas is the result of the occupation. They say Israel has a right to defend itself. Don't Palestinians have the right to defend themselves?" Buttu, who said she was "shocked" by the brutality of the Hamas massacre, explains that she is offended when Jewish Israelis ask her about October 7th. "They are waiting for either a condemnation or some sort of sentiment, and it's a form of dehumanization," she told me. "It's a questioning of my moral fibre. I don't ask an Israeli about the fact that you are living in the aftermath of the Nakba"—the Arabic word means "catastrophe," and refers to the mass dispossession of Palestinians during and after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. "Or about how your father is a general who carried out crimes. It's O.K. for them to question your moral fibre, whereas I have never done that to an Israeli."

Hadas Ziv, the director of ethics and policy at Physicians for Human Rights Israel, has worked for years defending Palestinians in Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza. She advocates for the rights of migrants, asylum seekers, and prison detainees. Lately, she has been involved in gathering publicly available testimony and forensic evidence about the sexual assaults committed by Hamas, and says that the evidence points to rape, in this instance, being "a weapon of war." (Hamas spokesmen have denied the accusation.) She has been condemned by Palestinians online who find her latest work to be excessively "pro-Israeli."

"This is part of what breaks my heart," Ziv told me. "When I see Israelis and Palestinians, I see twins, people who are alike in so many ways, mirroring each other, yet they go on inflicting more and more trauma on each other to the point where we refuse to see each other."

Itai Pessach is the director of the Edmond and Lily Safra Children's Hospital, in Ramat Gan. Thirty-one of the hostages who were released in November came to his hospital for a few days of examination and rest, a "buffer" period before going home. Pessach helped care for nearly all of them. The hostages at the hospital ranged in age from four to eighty-four. None of them escaped physical injury, abuse, or trauma. The hostages he saw were not raped, he said, but sexually abused all the same. ("Touched" was the word Pessach used.) Some hostages were kept in tunnels equipped with holding cells; others were in apartments. The Hamas guards played incessant "mind games" with their captives, Pessach said, separating parents from children for extended periods to deepen their anxieties and their sense of dependency. They told hostages that they'd been forgotten by their government, that their towns had been destroyed and their loved ones killed. Some, Pessach recounted, were informed that they were being released and then heard, "Oh, sorry, now you are staying."

Pessach witnessed deliriously happy reunions, with hostages running into the arms of their friends and families. Then he witnessed their more private grief-stricken "crashes" when they learned that a parent or a neighbor had been killed. And, for hours on end, he listened to their stories. "It is not different from the experiences that people have had in concentration camps," he said. "When you hear them talk about conserving food or worrying about being alive in the morning or worrying every time the door opens or trying to figure out the slight differences between the terrorists. Or worrying about what they say or if they can dare to cry. I've heard testimonies over the years from Holocaust survivors, and the choices parents had to make."

He talked about a hostage in her thirties, Yarden Roman-Gat, from Kibbutz Be'eri, whose family was being pursued by Hamas soldiers and had to make an excruciating choice: she handed her three-year-old daughter, Geffen, to her husband, Alon, because he was the better runner. Alon sprinted off carrying Geffen and eventually hid in a ditch, for eight and a half hours. Yarden, who was running alone, grew exhausted after a while, fell to the ground, and tried to fool the Hamas terrorists who found her by playing dead. They picked her up, threw her in a car, and took her to Gaza, where she was a hostage for fifty-four days. She was released in November.

But there was one thing that Pessach was focussed on now: "When will the next group of captives come?" Or would there be any at all? Numerous sources had told me they were concerned that at least some remaining hostages had been so badly abused that it would not be in Hamas's interest to turn them over. "Every day that passes, I get more worried," Pessach said. "I see what captivity did over fifty days to the elderly women we accepted, to the children. I'm really worried that those who are there will not come back or that they'll be in horrible shape."

Pessach said he'd been watching interview shows on television in which former hostages described their experiences. He worries that doing so might hinder their recovery. "But I understand why they are doing it," he said. "They seem to have no choice but to tell their stories. They feel it is their duty to the others still in captivity."

What had been, until now, the most famous hostage crisis in the history of Israel was instrumental in Netanyahu's rise to power. On June 27, 1976, two Palestinians affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and two Germans from a guerrilla group called the Revolutionary Cells hijacked an Air France flight carrying some two hundred and forty passengers from Tel Aviv to Paris after a stopover in Athens. Intent on freeing Palestinian prisoners in Israel and scoring a multimillion-dollar ransom, the hijackers directed the flight to the Entebbe airport, in Uganda. This was the era of the Ugandan despot Idi Amin, who sent soldiers to support the hijackers when they landed.

As Israeli officials negotiated with the hijackers, Mossad and various military commanders devised a rescue plan led by Sayeret Matkal, an élite special-forces unit. Both Bibi Netanyahu and his older brother, Yonatan, did their military service with Sayeret Matkal, and Yonatan, known as Yoni, was selected to lead the mission at Entebbe. The scheme was almost preposterously daring, involving four cargo planes and two Boeing 707s. Flying over the Red Sea, the rescuers had to maintain an altitude of around a hundred feet to avoid radar detection. Inside one of the cargo planes was a black Mercedes equipped to look like Idi Amin's Presidential car. Once they landed at Entebbe, the Mercedes, with Yoni inside giving orders, led the charge toward the hijackers and their Israeli captives. The mission succeeded beyond all expectations, liberating nearly all the hostages. There were, however, casualties. Three of the Israeli hostages died. And Yoni Netanyahu was shot and killed.

It was left to Bibi Netanyahu to tell his parents the terrible news. He was in the United States at the time, working for the Boston Consulting Group and studying at M.I.T. Rather than call his parents in Ithaca, where his father had been a professor at Cornell, Bibi drove seven hours to see them, "a Via Dolorosa of unspeakable pain," he wrote later. "If there was a moment in my life worse than hearing about Yoni's death, it was telling my parents about it. I felt like a man on a rack whose limbs are torn from him one by one."

Eventually, the family collected Yoni's letters and published them as a book that became a talisman of national valor. Yoni came to represent the highest level of sacrifice, and the family name became ubiquitous in Israel. Being a brother, and a brother-in-arms, to a martyr seemed to give hard focus to Netanyahu's ambitions. Yoni, according to Netanyahu, once told a friend that Bibi had what it took to be Prime Minister one day. This, too, became part of the legend. "Though Yoni had died in the war on terror, he never thought this battle was merely a military conflict," Netanyahu has written. "He saw it also as a political and moral struggle between civilization and barbarism. I now devoted myself to this battle."

In 1978, when he was twenty-eight, Netanyahu appeared on Boston public television, which carried a debate show called "The Advocates." That night, at Faneuil Hall, the debate resolution was "Should the United States support 'self-determination' for Palestinians in a Middle East peace settlement?" With a fluid baritone and unaccented American English that would become familiar in the years to come from his many appearances on "Nightline" and "Meet the Press," Netanyahu made the customary right-wing arguments of the time: There already was a Palestinian state—the Kingdom of Jordan. Besides, he said, Yasir Arafat and the Palestinians did not intend "to build a state but to destroy one," the State of Israel.

After moving back to Israel, in the late seventies, the Netanyahus began a forum for antiterrorism studies in Yoni's name, the Jonathan Institute. As the leader of the enterprise, Bibi befriended an array of wealthy donors, conservative intellectuals, and sympathetic politicians, from Norman Podhoretz to Henry Jackson. As a young politician, he moved rapidly up the ranks of the Likud Party, first serving, in the mid-eighties, as a diplomat at the U.N.—one with a particular gift for getting out the government's distinctly conservative message, particularly for foreign consumption—and then as a shrewd party politician in the Knesset.

In 1996, following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Netanyahu won a term as Prime Minister, which lasted three years. He was the chair of the Likud Party in June, 2006, when another hostage crisis arose: an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, was captured by Hamas fighters who had entered the southern Israeli kibbutz of Kerem Shalom by tunnel. The fighters killed two Israeli soldiers, grabbed Shalit, and brought him to Gaza. The first Prime Minister who had to deal with the Shalit crisis, Ehud Olmert, refused to give in to what he called "extortion" by a "murderous" terror organization. But Shalit's kidnapping wore on the frayed nerves of Israeli society. Wasn't the purpose of the state to safeguard its citizens? Netanyahu became Prime Minister again in 2009, and two years later he made an astonishing deal, securing Shalit's release in exchange for more than a thousand Palestinian prisoners, some of them responsible for the deaths of multiple Israelis. One of the prisoners was Yahya Sinwar, a Hamas military leader, who returned home and eventually became the leader of Hamas in Gaza.

"Entebbe was a building block in the Israeli ethos, and it led people to have the belief that Israel will do anything to bring back hostages," Ilana Dayan told me. "That includes Gilad Shalit. It was far less heroic than Entebbe, but the state paid the highest price for one soldier."

Even before October 7th, the Shalit exchange had come under intense criticism; many thought that Netanyahu

"Wish me luck! Edwin is introducing me to his parents, so I can check if he'll still be hot at fifty."

had done it to get out of a political jam, at a time when hundreds of thousands of Israelis had taken to the streets to protest a contracting economy. A few years ago, Olmert insisted that it "showed weakness, which damaged the State of Israel." But what Netanyahu must explain now is why neither he nor his upper echelon of security leaders heeded warnings from intelligence officers and military analysts that Hamas was preparing the operation that they named Al-Aqsa Flood. (The Prime Minister's office denies that Netanyahu received any early intelligence about a Hamas attack.) Among liberal, secular Israelis, Netanyahu has always been an object of scorn on a range of social and political issues, but now, across the ideological landscape, he stands accused of failing utterly on his promise of vigilance and security.

"Now all of a sudden the state is not there when the people are kidnapped," Dayan said. She had interviewed Yaffa Adar, an eighty-five-year-old resident of Kibbutz Nir Oz, who described how she was kidnapped by Hamas on October 7th and carried off to Gaza on a golf cart. Adar told Dayan that as she was riding toward the Strip she was looking up to the skies, searching for I.D.F. planes and helicopters, and wondering why they were not coming to rescue her.

"There was an absence of the state!" Dayan said. "We have never experienced this. Being an Israeli means that the sense of the state is internalized in you. It's part of who you are. And all of a sudden, where is the state?"

In 2021, Netanyahu was voted out as Prime Minister after a dozen years; over time, his divisive rhetoric and ever-expanding arrogance alienated even some of his most loyal aides and ministers. And so he decided that he would write a memoir, not unlike his idol, Winston Churchill. "Bibi: My Story," which was published in Hebrew and English in 2022, is a self-admiring tome, in which he is right in every argument, the hero of every anecdote. Across some seven hundred pages, he portrays himself as the singular guardian of Israel, his father's son. Even when he appeared amenable to compromise—as when he delivered a speech at Bar-Ilan University, in 2009, that conveyed a wary and highly conditional openness to a Palestinian state—he did so tactically, to ease pressure from internal political currents and, more often, to get American Presidents off his back. In this instance, Barack Obama.

Most of his American interlocutors long ago came to understand the dodge. "The Bar-Ilan speech was part of his bullshit," Martin Indyk, a former U.S. Ambassador to Israel, told me. "We met a day or two after the speech. He was all puffed up and he said to me, 'All right, I *said* it, now can we get on to dealing with Iran?'"

In his memoir, Netanyahu describes Israel's periodic clashes with Hamas, which took power in Gaza not long after the Israelis uprooted their settlements there, in 2005. Every couple of years or so, in his narrative, Hamas would fire rockets at Israeli cities and towns and Netanyahu would order far deadlier bombing raids. And then, following protests and pressure from foreign states, there would be negotiations and, eventually, a kind of peace. This pattern of prolonged periods of calm interspersed with military action came to be known as "mowing the lawn." Netanyahu resisted calls to go further:

> The public invariably expects the government to continue the battle and "flatten Gaza," believing that with enough punishment the Hamas regime would collapse. Yet that would only happen if we sent in the army. The casualties would mount: many hundreds on the Israeli side and many thousands on the Palestinian side. Did I really want to tie down the IDF in Gaza for years when we had to deal with Iran and a possible Syrian front? The answer was categorically no. I had bigger fish to fry.

What Netanyahu scarcely acknowledges in his memoir is the security policy in which Israel allowed Qatar to bankroll Hamas, figuring that it would forgo the ecstasies of armed resistance and embrace the burdens of governance. In the meantime, Netanyahu could concentrate on subduing the restive West Bank and on weakening the Palestinian Authority, which struggled to administer it. This dual-track policy was also intended to muzzle any coherent demands for negotiations.

In the years to come, it became clear that Netanyahu's grand strategy was to complete the conversion of Israel's old Labor Zionist socialist economy to a wealthy free-market Startup Nation economy and to implement a new security paradigm, in which Israel formed political, military, and economic ties with Gulf Arab states to oppose the Tehran-led "axis of resistance." In that plan, the Palestinians were hardly a priority. They could be easily contained, even ignored. "The road to a broader Middle East peace between Israel and the Arab world did not go *through* the Palestinian seat of government in Ramallah," he wrote. "It went *around* it." There was now no real need to annex the West Bank and its half million settlers. The settlers had annexed the State of Israel.

Three years ago, as Netanyahu was writing his book and serving as the leader of the opposition, he seemed as if he might ease into a well-upholstered retirement. His highest priority, it appeared, was to shake free of a series of criminal corruption indictments; he had been charged with everything from accepting illegal gifts—Cuban cigars, jewelry, champagne—to making a shady deal with a media baron to win favorable coverage. (Netanyahu has consistently denied any wrongdoing.) For a while, it seemed possible that he might accept a plea bargain in which he would not face jail time but instead pay a fine and agree to stay out of politics. Such a deal had its allure. He and his wife, Sara, had long ago come to enjoy the largesse of friendly billionaires. Now he could sit on corporate boards, accept lucrative speaking engagements in the States, and enjoy the plaudits of that half of the country which still saw him as he saw himself: the sole Israeli statesman strong enough to stand up to homicidal ayatollahs, duplicitous Palestinians, credulous U.S. Presidents, sanctimonious human-rights organizations, and a ruthless liberal media.

In time, the plea-bargain talks collapsed, a new attorney general came on the scene, and Netanyahu reclaimed the one position that provided refuge from prosecution—his old job. At the end of 2022, he forged a hard-right coalition that allowed him to return as Prime Minister. He brought into the

DRAGONFLIES

When my nephew pudges with his saggy pumpkin
face, and I think maybe it's his mouth he's got
around some gewgaw from the floor, I want
to pry his trap open, but he won't budge. It's
like his lips are sewn shut in some horror-flick
affliction, which is so freaking cute I wish I could
Cookie Monster his whole head. He gets it
from our side, his mouth almighty, for we Pardlo men
have been known to show less sense than appetite.
Pop claimed I used to hum in protest the final bars
of the "Marseillaise," or at least that's what he
heard when, attacked by "dragonflies," as he
called it, as in *that boy got the dragonflies*—
the kind fictive as the bogeyman, needles stitching
shut the pieholes of chatterboxes and tattletales,
having mesmerized the brats like flying spoons
of tapioca—I used to zip it as if I had Houdini
in there, or like my tongue was busy putting boat
knots in phantom maraschino stems. *Boy looks like
a monkey on a cupcake!* the old man would say, none
of which rings a bell, but he swore it's true, my face.
I must have worn that foolish grin to death as
every hunger in our house was second to his,
my old man fearing, perhaps like Goya's Saturn,
his dominion's decline, and, though he'd taunt me,
refused to let him see me cry.

—*Gregory Pardlo*

fold a raft of reactionaries, including his national-security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, and his finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, both of whom endorse the full annexation of the West Bank and have recently called for the expulsion of Gaza's population. Netanyahu also pushed a wildly contentious "judicial reform" law; its opponents—perhaps more than half the country, some surveys suggested—feared that it would undermine the Supreme Court, the balance of powers, and democracy itself. The street demonstrations against the reform were unprecedented in scale and frequency; thousands of reservists, the core of the national defense in any wide-scale emergency, threatened not to show up for duty in protest. The defense minister, Yoav Gallant, finally deemed the proposed legislation a clear and present danger to national security, and asked Netanyahu to call it off. Netanyahu fired Gallant, and then, after more displays of public outrage on the street, he unfired him.

It wasn't just the Tel Aviv left that had come to view Netanyahu as a threat to the state. Even old allies on the right could no longer ignore the spectacle of his narcissism and self-dealing. Michael Oren, a former member of the Knesset and Ambassador to the U.S. under Netanyahu, was one of many who trotted out the apocryphal remark of Louis XIV, "*L'état, c'est moi*"—the state is me—to characterize the Prime Minister's attitude. Netanyahu, Oren told me, "seems unable to distinguish between personal and political interests." Ami Ayalon, the former head of Shin Bet, the country's internal security service, described Netanyahu to me as "a person who will sell out everyone and everything in order to stay in power." Moshe Ya'alon, the defense minister from 2013 to 2016, told me that Netanyahu's ideology is now "personal political survival," adding that his coalition partners "don't represent the vast majority of the Israeli people" and are "so messianic that they believe in Jewish supremacy—'Mein Kampf' in the opposite direction. They've taken Netanyahu hostage."

Meanwhile, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, and the head of the military wing, Mohammed Deif, appear to have seen what Gallant saw: that Israel was consumed with its own divisions; that the state, including the Israel Defense Forces, was overstretched, distracted, and dysfunctional. The security establishment was reportedly receiving information about a potentially colossal disaster. Officers in Unit 8200, an intelligence group in the I.D.F., provided senior officers with detailed and alarming information about Hamas training exercises inside Gaza in which combatants practiced raids on mocked-up kibbutzim much like the ones just over the fence in southern Israel. One intercepted Hamas communication said, "We have completed killing all the residents of the kibbutz." According to Israeli media reports, the intelligence was dismissed by senior officers as "imaginary." (An I.D.F. spokesman said that "questions of this kind will be looked into at a later stage.")

In both March and July of 2023, Brigadier General Amit Saar, the head of the research division at military intelligence, wrote to the Prime Minister warning that Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran recognized that Israel was "in a blistering, unprecedented crisis threatening its cohesion" and saw an opportunity "to create the perfect storm." According to *Haaretz*, Saar concluded that the enemy saw Israel's chaos and vulnerability as "the practical fulfillment of their basic world view—Israel is a foreign implant, a weak, divided society that will ultimately disappear."

Even if Netanyahu was unwilling to take Gallant or Saar seriously, he was certainly capable of imagining the worst on his own. His prescience was a point of pride, after all. In his memoir, he depicts himself as clear-eyed, informed, always one step ahead. "It was tunnel warfare on a grand scale," Netanyahu wrote, describing the run-up to Operation Protective Edge, in the summer of 2014, in which Israel responded to Hamas rocket attacks with aerial bombardment and tanks. "Hamas intended to surprise Israel by initiating the simultaneous penetration of *hundreds* of terrorists into the country. They planned to enter kindergartens and schools, murder Israelis and whisk dozens of hostages to Gaza back through the tunnels. This could spell disaster."

Eight years later, Sinwar made little secret of his ultimate intentions. "We will come to you, God willing, in a roaring flood," he said in a speech in December, 2022. "We will come to you with endless rockets, we will come to you in a limitless flood of soldiers, we will come to you with millions of our people, like the repeating tide." Netanyahu's attention was elsewhere.

Late one afternoon, I went to Rishon LeZion, a city south of Tel Aviv, to visit Avichai Brodutch. When I first met him, in October, he had set up a one-man vigil outside the Kirya defense compound to call on the government to do more to bring home his wife and three small children, who had been taken to Gaza from their home in Kibbutz Kfar Aza. He attracted a crowd that soon turned into a large anti-government demonstration. When we talked that day, he chose his words carefully, lest he say something to anger Hamas and further endanger his family. But now his family had come home, part of the exchange in November of a hundred and five hostages for two hundred and forty Palestinian prisoners. He could speak more freely.

We were at the house of a friend of his, where a back-yard barbecue was in full swing, with loads of kids running around: sausages, hot dogs, and burgers on the grill. It was a joyful gathering, but one where people talked of the hostages still in Gaza. Brodutch's wife, Hagar, was running late, and Brodutch said she might not come at all: "She's having a very hard time." Their three children—Ofri, Yuval, and Uriah—were happily playing with Legos and eating more than their fill. Brodutch encouraged their consumption. In captivity, the family had been given meagre rations, often no more than a piece of pita bread. They were held mainly in apartments, not in tunnels, as many were. But they came home pale, weak, thin, covered in lice.

As his kids now played safely at his side, Brodutch was able to tell me what had happened on October 7th. A farmer who has been preparing to be an emergency-room nurse, he is also an occasional amateur photographer. "Whenever there was rocket fire from Gaza, I would take pictures," he recalled. At around six-thirty in the morning, there was a prolonged barrage of rocket fire. He went out to take pictures and ducked inside for a moment to tell Hagar that this was "tenfold different," more rocket fire than they'd ever seen. "I came back outside to take my photos and that's when I saw a motorized paraglider in the air, Hamas—and my heart just fell." He told his wife to get in their safe room with the children. As a member of Kfar Aza's civil security team, he was about to run to the armory when there was a delicate knock at the door.

"I looked through the peephole," he said, "and saw a little girl." She was Avigail Idan, a neighbor's three-year-old daughter. "I opened the door, but she ran away. I yelled, 'Avigail, come back!' I ran after her, picked her up. She was smeared with blood, but not hurt." Hagar, Avigail, and the Brodutch children took refuge in the safe room.

Brodutch ran toward the armory, through people's yards: "Then they were firing on us. People started falling. Friends of mine were killed next to me. By some miracle, I managed to survive that. I got a message that there was gunfire at a friend's house. So I ran over there." He remembered not just gunfire but the blasts of grenades, R.P.G.s.

"Now I was injured, with shrapnel in my right leg. I couldn't carry on fighting. A friend who came to rescue me got hit in the leg as well. He was bleeding a lot, so he used my belt and my magazine for a tourniquet."

The Hamas fighters finally scattered, and he recalled some local police arriving a couple of hours later. "I got a message from my wife on WhatsApp. At 11 A.M., she wrote, 'They are coming in the house.' That was the last message I got. I was sure they had all been killed." It was only a day later that he learned that his family, along with Avigail, had been taken hostage. Avigail didn't know it, but she was now an orphan; her parents had both been murdered in their home. The blood on Avigail was her father's. He'd been shot while holding her.

After fifty-one days in captivity, Hagar and the children, along with Avigail, were released. In Gaza, Hagar had had no news of her husband. She was convinced that he'd been killed. When they finally greeted each other, the children were smiling, wildly happy to see their father and their beloved chocolate-brown Ridgeback. "But my wife was not smiling," Brodutch recalled. "She knew the situation."

Initially, the kids seemed fine. They talked about the card game they'd devised while in Gaza. They played with all the new toys they were given after they were released. But there were long sleepless nights to come. For the children, Brodutch said, a dark room or being separated from Hagar or even just a loud noise could "reignite the trauma."

As Brodutch told their story, Ofri, his ten-year-old daughter, his eldest, settled into his lap. He asked her what she thought about in Gaza. She said she was always dreaming about food.

"What were you hungry for?" he said.

"Sushi—there's no sushi in Gaza!" she said, laughing. Then she grew more serious and said, "We thought about you, Abba. Sometimes I thought you were alive. Sometimes I thought you were dead."

In mid-December, the news came that Israeli soldiers on patrol in Gaza City accidentally shot three hostages whose captors had been killed. The hostages were stripped to the waist and holding up an improvised white flag in surrender; one spoke in Hebrew. They'd even spray-painted the words "SOS" and "Help, 3 hostages" on a building nearby. Still, the soldiers seemed to think it was a trap. Two of the slain were family friends of the Brodutches from Kfar Aza. "Hagar was just getting on her feet, and this news devastated her," Brodutch said. In fact, the news made many Israelis throughout the country worried about their own Army; it made some of them think harder about the ruthlessness of the operation in Gaza, the death count climbing every day.

"You know, when people were out on the streets, I never understood what they were protesting against," Brodutch said. "They were talking about democracy, and it didn't speak to me. I really had the best life. We had a swimming pool at the kibbutz. The kids would play. We'd have friends come over for dinner and we would drink, and I would say, 'What are you protesting?' And they would speak in these phrases."

What appalls him now is a lack of accountability in Netanyahu's government. "No one is taking blame for *this*," he said. "Someone had to come from the government and say, 'This was our fault.' Especially about the hostages. 'This is our fault, and we are going to do everything we can to bring them home.' But they are not saying that. If these hostages are killed, this country has no right to keep on going. Israel was established after the Holocaust, and it had one mission: never again. This happened on Israeli soil—and not just to Jews but to Muslims, Arabs, and Thais. If a ceasefire is necessary to bring them home, then yes. Israel should be thinking about one thing only: bring back the hostages."

But the era of Gilad Shalit is over. In an interview with Israel's Channel 12, Hagar Brodutch described how she and the children were being held by their captors in a building next to one that was being shelled by the I.D.F. She described how difficult it was to explain to them that "it is their own Army that was supposed to protect them there in their home, where they instead abandoned them. Now the I.D.F. was shelling them while they are inside Gaza. And it didn't stop. With each passing day, you tell yourself it can't be. It doesn't make sense. They know I'm here. They know my children are here. This is the most important asset Israel has, our children. . . . And then in hindsight, when I came back, I saw we were not the most important priority of the Israeli government." I told Avichai Brodutch what officials had told me—that in wartime it was *important* to bring home the hostages, but the *priority* was winning the war.

"That's what I hear, too," Brodutch said, and he went on stroking his daughter's hand.

SOFIA WARREN

"Let's do bottomless brunch,' you said. 'It'll be fun,' you said."

The war went on, brutally. The Israeli air strikes aimed at Hamas commanders and fighters, tunnels and munitions supplies, were killing civilians, dozens at a time. With no warning, on October 31st, the Israelis, according to the *Times*, dropped two-thousand-pound bombs on the Jabalia refugee camp, one of the most densely populated precincts of Gaza, killing at least a hundred and twenty-six people, many of them children. An I.D.F. spokesman said the mission had succeeded in killing Ibrahim Biari, a leader of the October 7th attack. The spokesman also issued the by now familiar regrets for civilian losses, pointing out that Hamas used civilians as "human shields." In late December, Israel dropped similarly large bombs on the Al-Maghazi neighborhood, in central Gaza, killing dozens more Palestinians, many of whom had fled there from the northern part of the Strip. "The I.D.F. regrets the harm to uninvolved individuals, and is working to draw lessons from the incident," a spokesman said. But, despite international condemnation and the Biden Administration's pressure on Netanyahu to scale back the attacks, the bombing continued, as did the ritual statements. (The Prime Minister's office insists that the I.D.F., under Netanyahu's direction, has done "its utmost to avoid civilian casualties.")

The denunciations from Palestinian

leaders were constant, and none more eloquent than a Christmas sermon delivered by the theologian Munther Isaac, in the West Bank city of Bethlehem. Isaac excoriated foreign governments for being "complicit" in the ongoing war. Christ was "under the rubble," he said. "How is the killing of nine thousand children self-defense?" Hassan Jabareen, the Palestinian Israeli human-rights lawyer, compared the Israeli assault on Gaza to guerrilla wars and military follies of the past—to Afghanistan, Iraq, and particularly Vietnam, where the guerrilla forces lost battle after battle by conventional markers but went on waging a war of attrition and, finally, outlasted their enemies. "Can we really imagine that Hamas will raise a white flag?" Jabareen said.

Mustafa Barghouti, the independent politician in the West Bank, compared the devastation in Gaza to that of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and told me the war being waged now was a "genocide." Jabareen used the same word, as do so many Palestinians, and I asked him to define what he meant. "Genocide is when you destroy the infrastructure and the culture and the bodies of people," he said. "In Gaza, they are destroying complete cities, mosques and universities, schools and courts and hospitals. One per cent of the citizens of Gaza have been killed. Most are civilians. You are killing them and divorcing them from where they live. You have a memory of time and place, and now the place is not there."

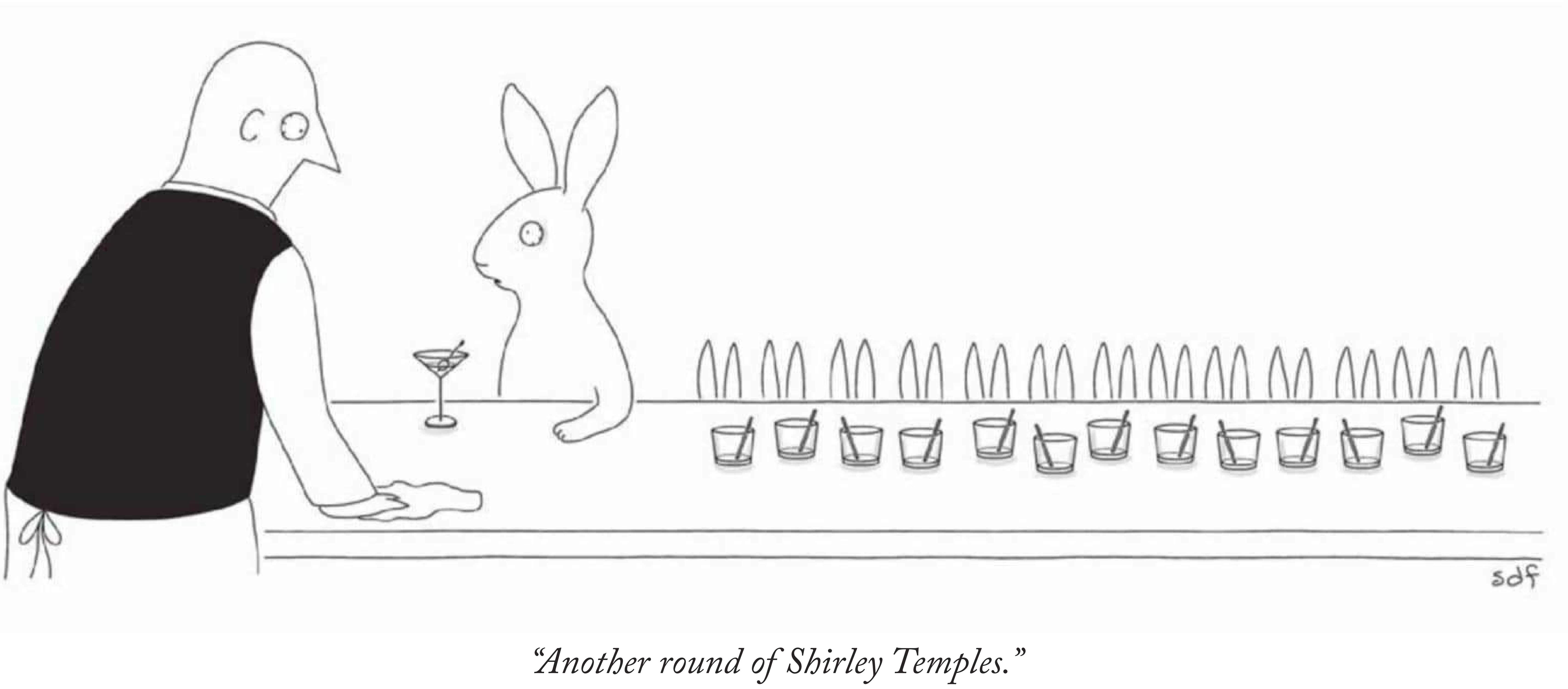
These considerations hold little sway with the Israel leadership, which has dismissed the genocide charges that South Africa has brought against it in The Hague as a "blood libel." Israel might ratchet down the bombing, pull back some troops, and move into a more targeted phase of the attempt to defeat Hamas as a military force, but officials say that they will not relent in their hunt for the Hamas leaders, particularly Yahya Sinwar. In the popular Israeli discourse, Sinwar is Osama bin Laden, the embodiment of the enemy. Netanyahu appealed to Hamas directly: "I say to the terrorists of Hamas: It's over. Don't die for Sinwar. Surrender now."

Born in a refugee camp, Sinwar was a prisoner in Israel from 1989 to 2011, and learned to speak fluent Hebrew. He follows the Israeli press, and seems to understand the nuances of the Israeli political scene far better than his fellow Hamas leaders, particularly the ones who live in opulence in Qatar or Lebanon. In November, Israeli newspapers started publishing passages from Sinwar's interrogations while in custody. According to the reports, Sinwar described consulting with the founder and leader of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, about rooting out and punishing collaborators with Israel. He coolly recounted having arrested a collaborator named Ramsi as he lay in bed with his wife in Khan Younis:

> We put him in a car and drove to the cemetery in Khan Yunis. We didn't tell Ramsi what we were going to do. While we interrogated him we didn't beat him much. On the way, I blindfolded him with a rag so he couldn't see. . . . I put him inside a large grave and strangled him with a kaffiyeh I had. After strangling him, I wrapped him in a white shroud and closed the grave. I was sure that Ramsi knew he deserved to die.

Michael Koubi, a former Shin Bet officer who spent hundreds of hours interrogating Sinwar, described him to me as consumed with hatred for Jews and infidels and so devoted to the cause that, for a long time, he refused to have a family. Koubi said, "Sinwar told me, 'Hamas is my wife, Hamas is my child.'" But Sinwar was also a crafty operative, in Koubi's appraisal, adept at organizing arms shipments into Gaza from abroad and building the Strip's extensive network of tunnels and underground bunkers.

"There is a popular notion that he is somehow a crazy guy who has lost contact with reality," Michael Milshtein, the former head of Palestinian intelligence for the I.D.F., told me. "Those terms reflect our lack of understanding. He is a very radical ideological leader, but you need to get into this logic. It's a logic with a different kind of values and we need to understand that." He went on, "Hamas promotes a dramatic, historic jihad against Israel, and maybe it won't be a total defeat of Israel, but it's an important way station on the way to defeat the Zionist entity and to control the al-Aqsa Mosque, in Jerusalem. This is the atmosphere he lives in. October 7th was the mission of his life. It's not a tactical or strategic move. He wants to be remembered in the history books as the new Sala-



"Another round of Shirley Temples."

din, the one who cost Israel a historic defeat. Maybe he will be killed. It doesn't matter.” Koubi, Sinwar's interrogator, agreed. “Right now, Sinwar is deep underground, but I can't imagine him surrendering. He wants to be a *shahid*, a martyr, a historical hero.” According to reports in the Israeli media, the I.D.F. believes that he is hiding in tunnels in the Khan Younis area and has surrounded himself with Israeli hostages as protection. (The I.D.F. declined to comment on this matter.)

Ami Ayalon, the former head of Shin Bet, told me that on October 7th Sinwar chose a “Samson option.” The plan was “diabolical,” Ayalon said, “but he brought the house down.” A conventional military defeat will not be important to Sinwar. “He will be rooted in the hearts of the Palestinians. And the only way for him to be defeated is to present a better idea, meaning a political horizon for two states. Sheikh Yassin once expressed that his biggest fear was that the Palestinians would come to believe that the Israelis will give them a state. Which, of course, Yassin saw as a betrayal of greater Palestine.”

Today, the prospect of two states for two people has never seemed more necessary or more distant. Fury and trauma dominate. The absolutists reign. Hussein Agha, a Lebanese academic who has worked as a negotiator for the Palestinians since before the Oslo Accords, told me that the experience of watching October 7th and its aftermath has been “a dagger in my heart. It reminds me that I am a loser. For fifty-five years, I've been trying to do something and now it culminates in an act of brutality—acts of brutality on both sides. It's all meaningless. It didn't amount to a hill of beans.”

He went on, “The Palestinians have been on the receiving end of brutality for a hundred years, and now was their chance to show they could do this. And it's important to note that almost no Palestinians stood against it, except some N.G.O.s, which get Western money. Even Abu Mazen”—Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority—“cannot come out clearly against it. This runs deep inside the Palestinian psyche, this very act. It borders on the Biblical. It has nothing to do with politics or the interaction of the two peoples. It's revenge. It comes out of a feud festering over decades, even centuries.” And even in the ruins of Gaza—amid all the suffering, death, destruction, and dislocation—many will revere Yahya Sinwar as an icon of armed resistance in the Palestinian national cause. “His picture from now on will be next to Arafat's everywhere,” Agha told me. “His picture will be in the pocket of every Palestinian teen-ager. Even if the Israelis kill him, he is a hero. The important result of this war was over the night of October 7th. The rest is revenge. The I.D.F. cannot kill Hamas. It's everywhere.”

On a cool, sunny morning in December, I made my way north from Tel Aviv, past the Sea of Galilee, to Kiryat Shmona, a small city on the Lebanese border that has long been under threat from the forces of Hezbollah, the Party of God. Kiryat Shmona and the surrounding villages are ghost towns now. More than eighty thousand people in the area have left or been evacuated. There have been casualties almost daily on both sides in the past few months. “It has definitely not been quiet,” an officer from Israel's Northern Command told me. “This is the most active it's been here since the Second Lebanon War. There's antitank missile fire, drones packed with C4, mortar fire every day.”

It is folly to guess what Sinwar, the presumed mastermind of Al-Aqsa Flood, thought would happen in every detail when he unleashed his rampage. But it is not unreasonable to infer that he hoped to ignite an all-out regional uprising against Israel, with Hezbollah in the lead. Many of the tactics and instruments of Al-Aqsa Flood were devised years ago by Hezbollah. As a fighting force, Hezbollah is far better trained and better equipped than Hamas. According to estimates by defense and intelligence experts, Hezbollah has tens of thousands of regional fighters throughout Lebanon and roughly twenty-five hundred élite commandos known as the Radwan; its arsenal features thousands of sophisticated missiles, many of them capable of hitting targets throughout Israel. Israeli security officials say that their forces are ultimately capable of defeating Hezbollah, but admit that a full-scale war would have Israeli citizens confined to bomb shelters and safe rooms for prolonged periods.

Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, is no less zealous than Sinwar in his stated desire to erase Israel from the map. But he has different constituencies and political concerns. Contemporary Lebanon is both a multiethnic state and a failed state. If Nasrallah were to attack Israel, he would be held responsible for the inevitable Israeli reprisals and the potential devastation not only of his Shia constituents in southern Lebanon but of Beirut.

“You will pay an unimaginable price,” Netanyahu warned Hezbollah in early November. And Nasrallah has more than just the Israeli Air Force to contend with. One of the first things Biden did after October 7th was to park two aircraft carriers in the eastern Mediterranean.

Nevertheless, there are some in the Israeli hierarchy who want the fight—and not just Ben-Gvir and Smotrich. In the first days after October 7th, there was an intense debate among Israeli and American officials over Nasrallah's intention. Did he want to go all in with Hamas? The Americans told the Israelis that Hezbollah did not necessarily want a head-on clash with the I.D.F. and that Netanyahu and his generals, who had warplanes in the air waiting for orders, should back off. Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, the two former generals brought into the unity government and war council, gave Netanyahu the same advice, and, in the end, he gave the order to stand down.

Accompanied by an Israeli journalist, a senior I.D.F. officer from the Northern Command, and a few other soldiers, I went even closer to the border, to Metula, the northernmost town in Israel. At times, we were no more than fifty metres from the border. The yellow-and-green Hezbollah flag, with its image of a fist hoisting an assault rifle, billowed lazily in the nearby hills above us. When we crossed the

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small streets of Metula, we were told to run: “We’re in the line of fire here.” Two soldiers had been injured nearby the day before. “And today is typical,” the senior officer said. “There were missiles at 8 A.M. and we responded. And it goes on like that throughout the day.” Hezbollah sends drones over Israeli towns and military positions. The Israelis respond with air strikes, hitting command towers, rocket-launching platforms, arms depots. “They are getting more aggressive and so are we. But we are not escalating.”

Later that afternoon, we had lunch with Shadi Khaloul, a Maronite Christian Israeli and a former I.D.F. officer, at a small hummus place in Jish, a village a few miles south of the border. The village’s population is mostly Maronites and Muslim Arabs. Khaloul said he was so concerned about the danger from Hezbollah that he sent his family abroad for several weeks. He remained concerned about a war with Hezbollah, and possibly a broader regional war. Qasem Soleimani, the leader of the Iranian Quds Force who was killed four years ago in a U.S. attack, envisioned a strategic encirclement of Israel by pro-Iranian forces. Since then, Sinwar and Hamas had exposed the vulnerability of Israel’s vaunted military and intelligence capabilities. “Even though Hezbollah did not join the attack on October 7th, they can still do it,” Khaloul said. “They are sure to be looking for a second opportunity.”

Back in the relative safety of Tel Aviv that night, I watched the news. The lead story was on resurgent fighting in the north. Casualties in Metula. Casualties in the Lebanese villages across the border. About two weeks later, Israel used a drone strike to kill Saleh al-Arouri, a senior leader of Hamas, in Beirut. Hezbollah promised reprisals, and delivered them, bombing an Israeli air-traffic-control base on Mt. Meron, in the north. Meanwhile, Antony Blinken, the U.S. Secretary of State, was shuttling from one capital to the next. Gaza was the essential subject, but so, too, was the fevered attempt to forestall a full-scale conflict on a second front. I recalled what Khaloul said would happen if it came to a war with Hezbollah: “The doors of Hell would open.”

In late 1973, the chief justice of the Israeli Supreme Court, Shimon Agranat, chaired an inquiry into the reasons that the Israeli security establishment and the government, led by Prime Minister Golda Meir, proved so unprepared for the attacks by Egypt and Syria, in the conflict known in Israel as the Yom Kippur War. That October, the Israelis had lost more than two thousand soldiers and, for days, faced the prospect of horrific defeat until turning the tide. (In one example of Sinwar’s historical consciousness, he launched Al-Aqsa Flood exactly fifty years after the first full day of the Yom Kippur War.) The findings of the Agranat Commission were so devastating that several top officials resigned. The commission cleared Meir of responsibility for the calamity, but Meir, declaring that it was “beyond my strength to continue carrying this burden,” stepped down as Prime Minister in April, 1974, and gave up her seat in the Knesset.

Netanyahu, in his memoir, is airily contemptuous of Meir and her defense minister, Moshe Dayan, saying that they had failed to react to a warning from an Egyptian Mossad asset about an imminent attack. “Golda Meir should have known better,” he wrote. But now some version of the Agranat Commission awaits Netanyahu. Although he denies that he was ever fully informed about the possibility of a major Hamas attack—and is almost sure to place the blame for the disaster on his military and security chiefs—it had been his policy to allow the funding of Hamas and, as his memoir makes plain, he knew Sinwar’s history and the capabilities of the armed wing of Hamas.

Leaders of the military and the security services have publicly acknowledged responsibility for the failures that led to October 7th. Netanyahu has said only that questions of responsibility will eventually be examined. Anshel Pfeffer, a *Haaretz* reporter and the author of a 2018 biography of Netanyahu, told me that the Prime Minister is always quick to take credit, but not responsibility: “If tomorrow Shin Bet discovered the hole that Sinwar is in and Sayeret Matkal put his head on a pike and the hostages were freed, Bibi would be there to take the credit.” Dennis Ross, a veteran U.S. diplomat in the Middle East, agreed, telling me, “He has been Prime Minister since 2009, except for one year. Can you think of him ever taking responsibility for anything?"

In conversations with former Prime Ministers, Knesset members, Israeli journalists, defense and intelligence officials, businesspeople, hostage families, and many others, I found general agreement that something like the following is bound to happen: as the war shifts to a lower, less "kinetic" level, thousands of reservists who were active in the judicial-reform protests and who are now fighting in Gaza will join anti-government demonstrations. "They will go home, take a shower, and then take to the streets," the former Prime Minister Yair Lapid told me. "These are good Israelis fighting admirably but also angry as hell at Netanyahu and this bunch of lunatics he's surrounded himself with."

Nearly all my sources added that, though Netanyahu is in deep political peril and could face a vote of no confidence or an election as soon as this summer, it would be unwise to count him out. "I go to funerals of politicians to make sure they are buried," Nahum Barnea, a longtime columnist for *Yedioth Ahronoth*, told me. "But comebacks are possible." Especially for Netanyahu. His guile in building coalitions is unmatched in Israeli politics and only improved when he dispensed with principle to join with the likes of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich. Moreover, when support for Hamas runs so high in the West Bank, with the country feeling so damaged, so insecure, it is hard to imagine any of Netanyahu's potential opponents taking up the issue of a two-state solution.

The moments when Netanyahu shows disdain for Biden are galling to American diplomats, but they play to his base. "The extent to which Netanyahu is desperate is manifested in his willingness to bite the hand that feeds him," Martin Indyk told me. "His sheer survival instinct is to show he can stand up to America. He boasts about it." Aaron David Miller, a former U.S. State Department Middle East negotiator and analyst who is now a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told me, "The political narcissism that has driven his career, particularly in the last decade, is astonishing. The challenges that Israel faces are incredible and yet its leader measures every single decision with an asterisk: What does this mean in terms of my political career and my freedom?"

"Politically, Bibi sold himself as Mr. Security, but that was obliterated on October 7th," a leading conservative in the Knesset told me. "Now he is Mr. Standing Up to America Who Will Impose on Us a Palestinian State. He is pivoting. After his grand failure, he needs a new story. He is going to try to sell the story that the security establishment failed, not him, and he is the only one to kill a Palestinian state."

When the war downshifts, Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot are almost certain to leave Netanyahu's war council and become, once more, his political opponents. Gantz, the leading contender to replace Netanyahu, is already mapping out a run with various advisers. Pfeffer published a long profile of him several years ago in *Haaretz*, when Gantz was crossing over from a military to a political career. At lunch one afternoon, he told me that Gantz rarely takes a firm position on controversial issues, including the Palestinian question, and is a "blank canvas" onto which voters can project their hopes and aspirations. His parents, born in Romania and Hungary, were Holocaust survivors. Although they were secular, they raised Gantz in a mainly religious moshav in south-central Israel. Tall, laconic, and handsome, he is the sort of officer with whom you hope to do your reserve duty.

Gantz is the not-Netanyahu. He was not responsible for dividing the country. He did not forge alliances with reactionary ministers and set out to undermine the Supreme Court. He was not responsible for the biggest security lapse in the history of the state. But what language will he deploy against the longest-serving Prime Minister in Israeli history? Many Israelis now, in their sense of rage and trauma, are no less suspicious of the Palestinians than Benzion Netanyahu was seventy-five years ago. In fact, the demonstrators last year avoided the topic for fear of narrowing the consensus against judicial reform. When it comes to the Palestinians, Gantz speaks only vaguely of a separate "entity," or a "two-entity solution."

"We want our country back. We want to feel safe again." That's what Netanyahu says his supporters told him when he was out of power a few years ago, urging him to reclaim the office. On page after page, his memoir is filled with illustrations of his magnificent foresight and unparalleled successes in cementing his nation's security. He explains how in May, 2021, in Operation Guardian of the Walls, miles of Gaza's underground tunnel network were destroyed, in a coup that "set Hamas back at least a decade." The operation "worked perfectly," he boasts. "We had neutralized the tunnel threat."

The longer the war goes on—and, according to top military analysts, it is not going nearly as well or as quickly as the I.D.F. had hoped—the more time Netanyahu will have to rebuild his base and undermine potential challengers. "Netanyahu has an interest in never finishing this stage of war," Nahum Barnea said. The Prime Minister's announced "prerequisites for peace," certainly, do not suggest he is looking for an off-ramp: "Hamas must be destroyed, Gaza must be demilitarized, and Palestinian society must be deradicalized." Yet Hamas has always been a product as well as a purveyor of brutality, and the Prime Minister hardly needs to be instructed in the gap between his political interests and the larger realities. Recounting a previous crisis in his memoir, he took pains to edify his readers on the subject. A full-blown war with Hamas, he wrote, would be a "hollow" spectacle with no satisfying end. "The Hamas leaders would come out from their holes and declare victory among the ruins." ♦

PERSONAL HISTORY

A NEW LIFE

Becoming a parent, ending a marriage.

BY LESLIE JAMISON

The baby and I arrived at our sublet with garbage bags full of shampoo and teething crackers, sleeves of instant oatmeal, zippered pajamas with little dangling feet. At a certain point, I'd run out of suitcases.

We had diapers patterned with drawings of scrambled eggs and bacon. *Why put breakfast on diapers*?, I might have asked, if there had been another adult in the room. There was not.

Outside, it was nineteen degrees in the sun. For the next month, we were renting this railroad one-bedroom beside a firehouse. I'd brought raspberries and a travel crib, white Christmas lights to make the dim space glow. Next door, a fireman strutted toward his engine with a chainsaw in one hand and a box of Cheerios in the other. My baby tracked his every move. What was he doing with her cereal?

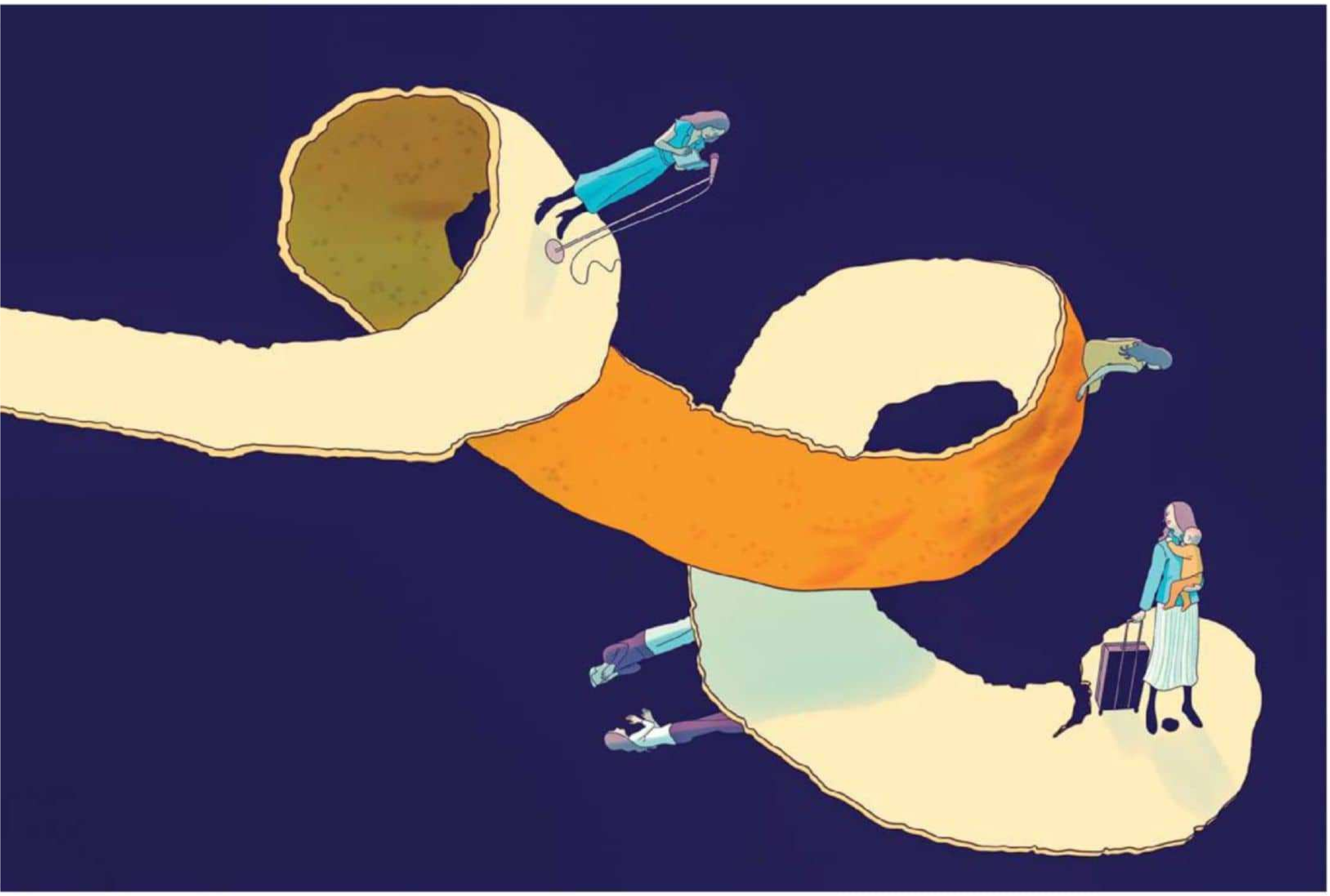
It was only when I told my divorce lawyer, "She is thirteen months old," that my voice finally broke. As it turns out, divorce lawyers keep tissues in their offices just like therapists, only not as ready to hand. "I know we've got them somewhere," she told me warily, rising from her swivel chair to search. As if to say, *We aren't surprised by your tears, but it's not our job to manage them*. If I cried for five minutes, it would cost me fifty dollars.

"Just *over* thirteen months," I added, wanting to make it seem like we'd stayed married longer than we actually had.

I was myself a "child of divorce," as they say, as if divorce were a parent. When I was very young, I thought divorce involved a ceremony, the couple moving backward through the choreography of their wedding, starting at the altar, unclasping their hands, and then walking separately down the aisle.

The sublet was long and dark. A friend called it our birth canal. It seemed to be owned by artists; it was not made for a child. The coffee table was just a stylish slab of wood resting on cinder blocks. The biggest piece of art was a large white canvas that looked like a wall, hanging on the wall. Sometimes the firemen next door ran their chainsaws for no good reason. But what did I know? Maybe there was a reason for everything.

Our nights were full of instant ramen and clementines. My fingers smelled



like oranges all winter. Our rooms were sometimes flooded with the liquid pulsing of red emergency lights through the slatted blinds. It was flu season. One night, I woke up at four in the morning with my mouth full of sweet saliva. I stumbled to the bathroom, past the dreaming baby, and knelt in front of the toilet until dawn. When the baby woke, I crawled after her from room to room, then lay on my side on the wooden floor and watched her, sideways. I didn't have the strength to stand, but I didn't want her out of my sight. The things she put in her mouth just blew my mind. All I could do was lie beside her toys, wrapped in a gray blanket, flushed and shivering. She handed me her favorite wooden stick, the one she used to play her rainbow xylophone. She picked up a Cheerio from the floor and lifted it tenderly toward my mouth.

A year earlier, my water had broken during a blizzard. My labor went fine until it didn't. Suddenly it was two in the morning and a nurse was bending over me, saying, "I need another pair of hands," over and over again, until there were many pairs of hands, too many pairs of hands, and they were looking for a heartbeat. Then people were running my gurney to the operating room, their voices calling out, "It's in the sixties! It's in the fifties!," and I knew they were talking about her heart.

They draped a blue tarp over the lower half of my body and tipped me backward to let the anesthesia flow faster up my torso. I remember wondering why we needed to depend on gravity like that. Hadn't science given us a better way?

After they cut her out of my abdomen, they carried her to the corner of the room. One impossibly small leg stuck out of the blanket. The anesthesiologist kept trying to take my blood pressure while my arms bucked against the gurney cuffs like tethered dogs. I didn't care about my blood pressure. My baby was small and she was purple and she was not in my arms. The whole time, I was shaking. The whole time, my husband was holding my hand. Drugs and adrenaline ran wild through my veins. It was only once they let me hold her that I finally went still.

At night, on the postpartum ward, the Empire State Building loomed through my hospital window, its tiny yellow squares glowing beyond the roof maze of snow-dusted vents and pipes. Whenever I walked to the bathroom, my I.V. cord got tangled around its pole. A blood clot fell out of my body and landed on the tiles. It was the size of a small avocado, jiggling like jelly.

The window ledge filled up with snacks from friends: graham crackers, cashews, cheddar cheese, coconut water, oranges with tiny green leaves. Someone handed me a form to fill out: Did I want bone broth? There were suddenly flowers—big, blooming lilies, purple orchids, lavender tulips. The blue mesh hospital underwear was the only kind of underwear I could imagine wearing. The swaddled baby in her glass-walled bassinet was like a deity at the foot of my bed. Sometimes her eyes opened and the world stopped.

When my mother arrived from California, I sat there on the starched sheets

ILLUSTRATION BY BIANCA BAGNARELLI

holding my baby, and my mother held me, and I cried uncontrollably, because I finally understood how much she loved me, and I could hardly stand the grace of it.

Back home from the hospital, during the first few weeks of my daughter's life, I lived in the gray glider by the back window. Our fridge was full of rotting aspirations: the salad-bound cucumber, now leaking brown fluid; the forgotten, softening strawberries; the marinara sauce furred with mold. It seemed like I was never doing anything besides nursing or wandering around with the baby against my chest. Life was little more than a thin stream of milk connecting my body to hers, occasionally interrupted by a peanut-butter sandwich.

Of course I'd heard babies were always waking up. But this now seemed like a joke. How did anyone get them to sleep in the first place? Every time I put the baby in her bassinet, she cried and cried. She slept only when she was being held. So my husband and I stayed up in shifts. Each day, between nursing sessions, I tried to pump enough extra milk to fill a single bottle, to enable a few hours of sleep that night. Usually I stayed up holding her till eleven or so, he was with her until two or three or four, and then I got up to hold her again until morning. Sometimes I'd wake to hear him fetching the bottle from the kitchen earlier than I'd hoped, barely past midnight, and I'd think, *No*, *no*, *no*, because it meant we were getting closer to the moment when my body would become irreplaceable again.

My mother had a two-month sublet nearby. I yearned for her arrival every morning. Her presence meant I could collapse into someone else, that I could ask—without apology, or hesitation—for the things I needed. As I nursed my daughter, my mother brought me endless glasses of water. Our three bodies composed a single hydraulic system. Every few hours, my mother put a plate on my lap, jigsawed with crackers bearing little squares of cheese, clusters of green grapes, apples fanned into slices. She said, "You need to eat." She held my baby girl against her chest and whispered in her ear, "You know how your mama loves you? That's how I love her."

My mother. After my parents split up, when I was eleven, it was just the two of us. On Sunday nights, we watched "Murder, She Wrote," eating bowls of ice cream side by side on the couch. She often solved the mystery by the second commercial break; she knew from the lost umbrella in the corner of the shot, or else from the fishy alibi that didn't check out. "Just got lucky," she'd say. It wasn't luck. It was her close attention to the details of the world, the same keen eye that kept track of every doctor's appointment, every passing comment I'd made about a school project or a tiff with a friend; she always followed up, wondered how it went. She helped me write down recipes in a little spiral-bound notebook of index cards so that I could make us dinner once a week. My economist father was on the other side of the country, or in his apartment across town, or in the sky. It was hard to keep track.

The Internet said babies needed reassurance at dusk because of their primal fear of being abandoned in the dark. "Don't worry, baby," I told the crying pajamas in my arms. "I won't abandon you in the dark." But, saying it out loud, it didn't sound like the worst idea. As I held her, I rocked back and forth, swaying left foot to right. My mother told me that her mother, raised on a farm north of Saskatoon, had called this the Saskatchewan Shuffle. But every mother knows it, that swaying. Every mother calls it something. Sometimes you will see a woman doing it instinctively, her arms empty, when she hears the crying of a stranger's baby.

She stopped crying. She slept. She woke. She cried again. She slept again. She nursed again. I kept feeding my baby. My mother kept feeding me. Months later, in couples therapy, my husband said, "The three of you were a closed world in that back room. I had no place in it."

Falling in love with my ex—I'll call him C—was not gradual. Falling in love with him was encompassing, consuming, life-expanding. It was like ripping hunks from a loaf of fresh bread and stuffing them in my mouth. In those early days, he was a man frying little disks of sausage on a hot plate in a Paris garret, a man asking me to marry him. Making me laugh so hard I slipped off our red couch. Loving the smoked tacos we got from a tiny shack just north of California's Morro Bay. Pointing out back-yard chickens from the garage we rented behind a surfer's bachelor pad. Putting his hand on my thigh while I drank contrast fluid that tasted like bitter Gatorade, before a CT scan to find a burst ovarian cyst. Playing Kate Bush on a road trip, putting a cinnamon bear on our rental-car dashboard, because it was our mascot, our trusty guide. Our thing. We had a thousand things, like everyone. But ours were only ours. Who will find them beautiful now?

When I met C, I was thirty years old. I wasn't a child. But there was so much I didn't know. I'd never made a choice I couldn't take back. I was drowning in the revocability of my own life. I wanted the solidity of what you couldn't undo. C had lived so much more than I had. It wasn't just that I was fresh from my twenties and he was well into his forties, it was also that he had lived through a great tragedy: the protracted, terrible illness and eventual death of his first wife. He had stayed with her in the hospital after two bone-marrow transplants. He'd shaved his head when her hair started falling out. He'd tried to get her to eat when she couldn't eat. He'd struck the wall when their insurance claims were denied, not for the first time. He spoke of her with deep admiration that was textured and true. He said I would have loved her; she would have loved me. We would have been friends.

I met C soon after ending a four-year relationship so gravitational that I'd felt our constant friction must be the necessary price of intensity. We'd moved back and forth between conflict and reconciliation, somehow feeling most present to each other in the passage from one state to the other. This was life under the shadow of the question mark. I spent long, agonizing hours on the phone with my mother, explaining my uncertainty to her, hoping she could help me decide. She asked, "What is your gut telling you?" But the question didn't help, because my gut told me conflicting things at once—that we were soul mates, and that we were doomed—and my gut wasn't a voice to be trusted, anyway. Recovery had taught me that. (My gut wanted a drink.)

By the time I met C, I was sick of listening to my gut; I was ready to bring in upper management. Upper management said I was done with waffling, done with going back and forth. Upper management told me not to listen to my doubts. They were only coaxing me back into a prior version of myself.

That first summer, when we were falling in love, I spent a month teaching in Paris. C came over to stay for a few days in my attic apartment on Rue Berthollet. We bought oozing almond croissants from the curt woman at the boulangerie. We got to be the bumbling Americans, with a wary Parisian shopkeeper correcting our change. I mumbled apologies for my terrible French while C cracked a joke about being dumb Americans, and she loved him for it, for not being mealymouthed and pandering, but jovially owning what he was.

At a party, a wine-drunk student who knew C's backstory asked whether he'd ever imagined the impossible scenario in which he had to choose between rescuing his first wife from a burning building and . . . he gestured toward me.

Of course C gave the guy a graceful trapdoor out of the moment. This was a skill he'd learned—how to make his grief more conversationally bearable for other people. But in an odd way I appreciated that this blundering drunk guy had made something important explicit: another woman's death was nestled inside every moment between us. It was the house we lived in.

I told myself it was a sign of maturity to surrender the fantasy of being someone's only great love. But it also made me crave our reckless escalation as proof that we had a great love, too. In bed, under the sloping roof of our Paris garret, C said that we should get married. I said yes, because I was in love with him—and because I wanted my whole self to want something, no questions asked.

That fall, we went to Las Vegas for a literary festival. At this point, we'd been talking about marriage for months without telling anyone else. Late one night, we drove to the Little White Wedding Chapel, which had a drive-up window and a white steeple rising from a bright-green lawn of fake grass. A sign showed the cursive names of Michael Jordan and Joan Collins with a heart between them, *married here*, as if they'd got married to each other. Anything was possible in this town.

Back at our hotel, we ordered big juicy steaks from room service. Looking back, we even had a soft spot for the pool attendant who wouldn't let us swim after midnight—*Sorry, closing time*—because his refusal became part of our crazy Vegas wedding story. Like a surreal fever dream, the night felt like a strange portal into new ways of being. I could become a person who eloped in Las Vegas! I could become a person who didn't change my mind. This sounds ridiculous when you say it plainly, but who hasn't yearned for it? Who hasn't wanted a binding contract with the self?

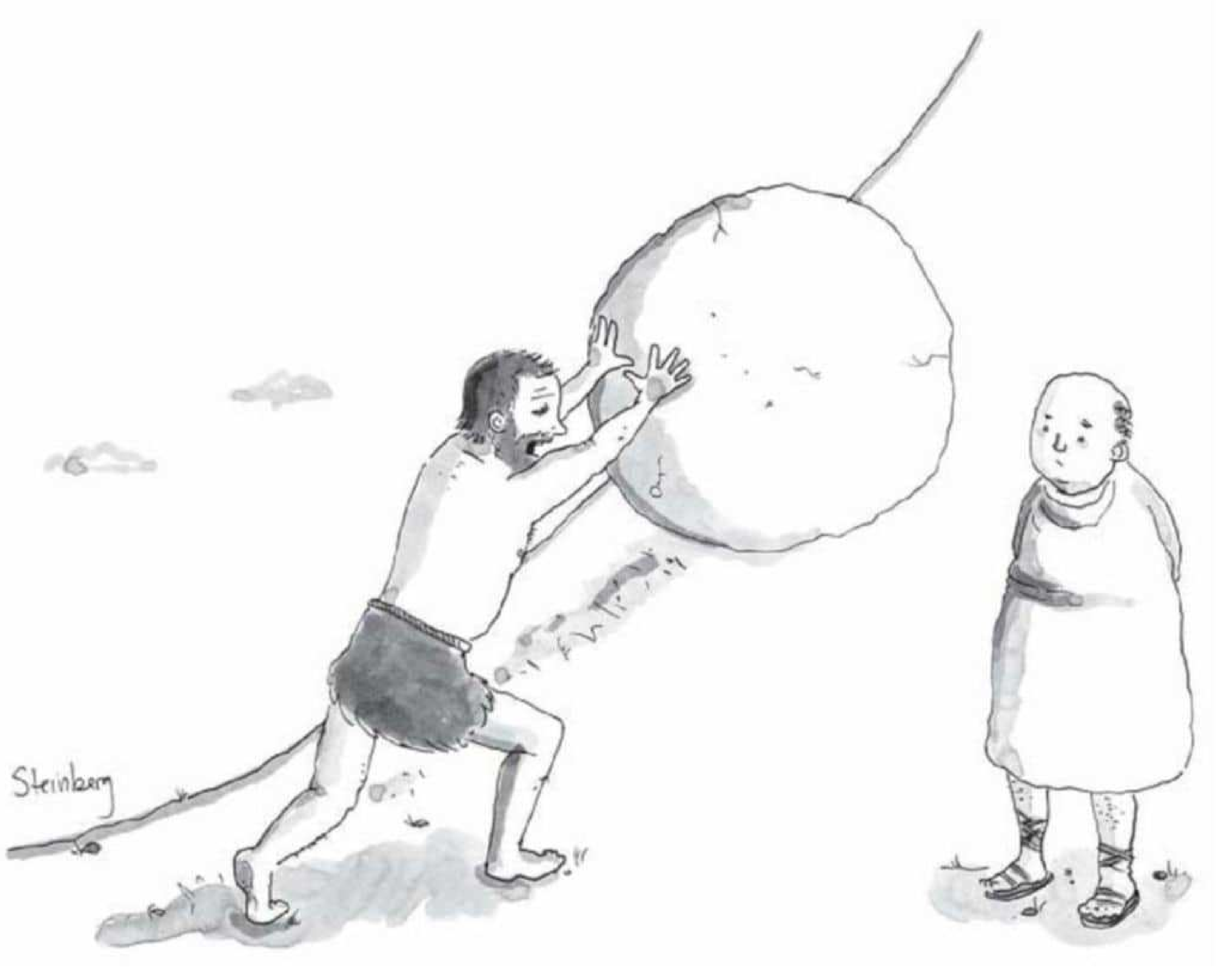
I'd heard that giving birth acts as a temporary appetite suppressant for sharks so that they will not eat their own young. But I was still hungry. I longed to write. In its best moments, writing made me feel that I was touching something larger than myself. During those early days with the baby, it was hard to feel that I was contacting anything larger than myself, my home, my child—anything larger than I could see the edges of. I'd always been a creature of to-do lists and efficiency. Now I was doing little besides keeping this tiny creature alive. The rhythms of my days were simple: left breast, right breast; left breast, right breast.

Because I could not hurl myself constantly into work and trips and teaching and deadlines, I had to look more closely at the life I'd built: this husband, this marriage. It was impossible to ignore my daily desire to leave—to wander the cold streets of our neighborhood with our baby, making ceaseless, ever-widening loops away from home.

One chilly day, I took her to the conservatories of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Her bright eyes darted from the palm fronds to the latticework of shadows they made on the ground. Every surface trembled, electrified by her attention. When we got home, C was in a bad mood. Through the years of our marriage, I'd grown attuned to the sudden flare in his eyes, and the shift of molecules in the room before an eruption of anger, like the pressure drop before a storm. It was almost a relief whenever the rain came. It was better than the humidity of his unspoken temper. I wanted to tell him about the greenhouse, the ways the baby's eyes had tracked the flickering shadows. But I sensed he wasn't in the mood to hear it.

Instead, I asked about his day. He said it had been terrible. "Hope you had fun frolicking in the gardens," he snapped, his voice taut with sarcasm.

I didn't ask why his day had been bad. I'd asked this question so many



"My dad was able to push a boulder up a hill for all eternity and earn enough to buy a freaking house."

times before, I thought I already knew the answers: his frustration with work, or else the unspoken hurt of our distance. Which is maybe how love dies—thinking you already know the answers.

I said none of this to him, just, "Our day was great," and let him read my tone however he wanted.

I'd always known that, if we had a child together—and I'd always wanted a child—he would be a loyal, playful, fiercely protective father to her. I never doubted it. But now that we had a baby, I felt so alone in parenting. We both did.

When my daughter was two months old, my mom went back home to Los Angeles. Over and over, I told her, "I don't know how I could have done this without you." This also meant, *How am I supposed to do it without you now*?

When she left, I cried uncontrollably, past all rationality—as if I were a child.

Once my mom was gone, it was mostly just me and the baby all day long. Three, four, five days a week, we walked to the Brooklyn Museum. Going to the museum was a way to saturate our endless hours with beauty. And it was warmer than spending all our time in the park.

The baby now consented to sleep in her stroller, as long as she was moving. So we never stopped. It made me think of the movie where the bus would explode if it ever slowed down. Or the way many sharks need to keep swimming to breathe. I was an art shark. I never stopped walking, except to nurse.

Sometimes I walked loops around Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party," her massive triangular table full of settings dedicated to historical women. My favorite belonged to the typhus-stunted astronomer who'd helped discover Uranus. Blue waves curled off the plate, as if gazing hard enough at the sky could eventually pull you off the ground.

I wanted my daughter to wake up, so she could see this art; and I wanted her to stay asleep, so I could see it—or, rather, so I could look at it without the interruption of her needs.

Chicago once said, "I also understood that I would never be able to have the career I wanted if I had children. . . . I wanted to be unencumbered."

Unencumbered. That word never felt more physical to me than it did whenever I pushed the stroller down snowy streets with a shoulder bag full of diapers and wipes and—if I was really on my game—an extra onesie.

Of the female artists she knew with children, Chicago said, "Even if they did succeed, they felt guilty all the time. They felt guilty when they were in their studios. They felt guilty when they were with their children."

Sometimes we ducked into the Egyptian rooms, pausing at the mummy mask of Bensuipet, with her kohl eyes and her crossed arms. She looked exhausted by the pageantry of the afterlife. Why couldn't you just die and be done with it?

Instead, she faced the long, messy business of rebirth. The ancient Egyptians believed that every fetus was created inside a man's body and then transferred to the woman during sex. (Why not give men credit for the fetus—even that?) After she died, a woman had to briefly turn into a man, just long enough to create the fetus of her next self. Then she became a woman again, so that she could incubate it. Only then was she reborn into the afterlife.

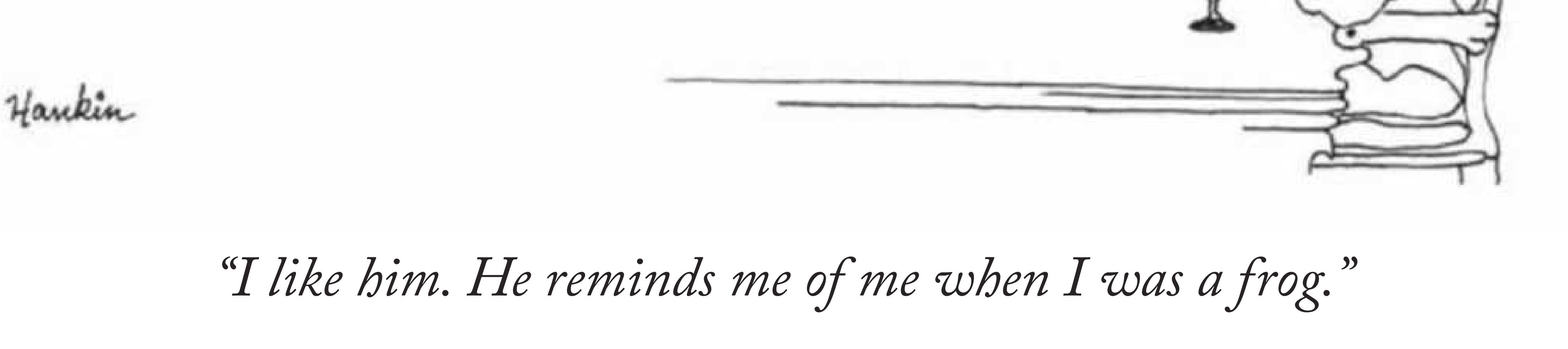
In this vision of one body doing everything, I found an echo of my own delusions of autonomy: a woman becoming a man to create the fetus, then becoming a woman again to carry it, then finally giving birth to herself. Not needing a man, but becoming one. Doing everything.

During those newborn months, I had a book coming out. I usually described it as a book about drinking and sobriety, though, honestly, it was a book about the only thing I ever wrote about: the great emptiness inside, the space I'd tried to fill with booze and sex and love and recovery and now, perhaps, with motherhood. The book was getting a lot of attention, which made me queasy—and also eager for more.

In April, I took the baby on a book tour. She was three months old. My mother came with us. Four weeks, eighteen cities. We stood at curbside baggage stands in Boston, Las Vegas, Cedar Rapids, San Francisco, Albuquerque, with our ridiculous caravan of suitcases, our bulky car seat, our portable crib. The baby in her travel stroller. The unbuckled carrier hanging loose from my waist like a second skin. Everywhere we went, I brought a handheld noise machine called a shusher. It was orange and white, and it calmed my baby down better than my own voice.

We ticked away the flights in silent rosaries. Praying she'd nap on the plane. Praying the flight attendant would let me keep her in the carrier. Praying she'd nurse on the final descent so that her ears could pop. Praying we'd remembered the shusher. Praying we could find a hardware store with the special screwdriver we needed to replace the dead batteries in the shusher. We needed that noise to survive. When my baby cried beside me in a Detroit hotel room at 4 A.M., the fourth time she'd woken up that night, I knew the four-month sleep regression had arrived. It didn't care how many state lines we'd crossed. It found us anyway.

In restaurants all across the country, I shoved food into my mouth above her fuzzy head as she slept in her carrier beneath my chin. The receipts were headed to my publisher, and I was determined to eat everything: trumpet mushrooms slick with pepper jam, gnocchi gritty with crumbs of corn bread that fell onto her little closed eyes, her head tipped back against my chest. I was flustered and feral,



"I like him. He reminds me of me when I was a frog."

my teeth flecked with pesto and furred with sugar. Then I pulled down my shirt and gave these meals to her. In Los Angeles, I nursed in the attic office above a bookstore lobby. In Portland, I nursed among cardboard boxes in a stockroom. In Cambridge, I nursed in a basement kitchenette beneath the public library.

Taking my baby on tour was a way of saying, *I can be the father who goes away, and the mother who stays.* It was only because of my mother that I got to do both. She held the baby whenever I wasn't holding the baby. She made it possible for me to approximate the thing I'd always admired her for doing, crafting a self that understood work and motherhood as forces that could feed rather than starve each other.

Everywhere we nursed, everywhere I read, every time I ate, I imagined someday telling my daughter the story of these days—every stockroom cardboard box I perched on to breast-feed, every hotel-lobby chair I used to change her diaper, every night I returned from a reading to watch her body sleeping in the dark, swelling with each milky breath, dreaming its inscrutable dreams. I imagined the tour as a set of memories I was embedding inside her, like sewing jewels into the hem of a coat. But it was tiring. Sometimes I wondered whether I was asking too much of the baby, demanding that she sleep in all these strange hotel rooms so that I could prove something to myself about work and motherhood making room for each other.

Reading at the front of a bookstore one night, I glanced up and saw my mother holding the baby snug against her chest, behind the crowd. They were rocking slowly back and forth. The Saskatchewan Shuffle. For a moment, it was as if the distance between our three bodies had collapsed, as if there were nothing else in the room.

When people said, *It must be exhausting to take a newborn on a book tour*, their assumption made me feel like a liar. How could I tell anyone the truth, that it was more exhausting at home? By the time our daughter arrived, we'd already been in couples therapy for three years, most of our relationship. Once a week, we went to a basement office and I squinted at the small bar of visible sky. The harder our home life got, the more guilty I felt for wanting to leave it. This was the same deluded faith in difficulty that made me starve myself at eighteen, running seven miles on the treadmill after eating six saltines for dinner. This same voice rose up again to say, *The harder it feels, the more necessary it must be.*

One of the sly reveals of couples therapy was that each way I found our marriage difficult—which I'd imagined as my own specialized arenas of suffering—seemed to have its corollary, like a lost twin, in C's experience. I felt as if I were always walking on eggshells; so did he. "Each of you is working so hard in your own separate corners," our therapist said. "Both of you feel like you are doing everything."

At the time, I was disappointed. I wanted her to confirm my belief that I was actually the one doing everything. But even then I could see that she was right. We were both doing a lot. This was the essential bait and switch of couples therapy. I went to get my narratives confirmed, and instead they were dislodged.

The idea that we both felt so many of the same painful things didn't help me believe that the marriage was more possible to save. It became harder and harder to convince myself that our good months in the beginning mattered more than all the friction that followed. It seemed like the good place we were trying to get back to was just a small sliver of what we were.

The first time I taught a class after my daughter's birth, it was a weekend workshop in Denver. She was six months old. C stayed with her in our hotel room down the block. We hadn't started her on formula yet and had no frozen milk away from home. So we were on the clock. We had to time my fifteen-minute class break just right.

At the beginning of class, I told my students, "My baby's just down the street," as if I were confessing some exotic medical condition they all needed to be aware of. They just nodded and smiled. Many were mothers. They knew the deal.

Before the workshop, I'd been afraid I'd be distracted the whole time I was teaching—my mind levitating above my body and slowly skulking back to my daughter. But, in fact, something more like the opposite happened. I felt intensely, almost ferociously present. My students were too committed, too full of desire, for me not to be right there with them: the marine from Florida writing about the laundry facility on his base in Iraq, soldiers bringing in their blood-stained uniforms; a woman with full-sleeve tattoos writing about trying to explain her depression to her Japanese lover; and an Australian mother who kept insisting that her postpartum depression wasn't interesting, even though those were the two paragraphs that people kept pointing to and saying, *Write more of this.*

It felt like I was growing larger, gaining layers, just by spending time with these students. Maybe I could bring some of that largeness back to my daughter, could mother her as a woman who contained the residue of all these strangers. This thought was like a stoned epiphany from college, except I hadn't been stoned in more than a decade.

When my phone buzzed with the third text from my husband, *She really needs to nurse*, I called our break early and ran, breasts hard and heavy as stones, my flip-flops slapping against the hot asphalt. I began to feel the dizzying vertigo of role-switching, draining and propulsive at once, flicking back and forth between selves: *I'm a teacher. I'm tits. I'm a teacher. I'm tits.*

How many plane flights did I take with her that first year? Thirty? Forty? It was hard to know whether I brought her everywhere because I constantly craved her presence or because I wanted to keep living as if she didn't exist at all. Every work itinerary was like a hall pass in school: a reading, an event, a college visit. Part of me was always looking for reasons to be away. The tides might tell themselves stories about why they're rushing in and out, but it's ultimately the moon that's in charge.

At a reading in Toronto, I was interviewed on a stage directly across from the room where a publicist was watching my baby. The walls were glass. They blocked the noise but not my view. It was like watching a silent movie in which another woman was actually the mother of my child.

At first, my daughter was happily slamming her fists against a wooden conference table, but then she started to get fussy. *Put her in the carrier*, I thought. The woman picked her up and started bouncing her around the room. *Nope*, I thought. *You gotta use the carrier*. My daughter started crying. But the glass was thick! I couldn't hear a thing. It was as if someone had pressed the Mute button on her. The woman picked up the carrier, clearly confused by it. *You have to clasp the buckle around your waist before you do the shoulder straps*, I thought. The woman interviewing me asked a question about how I excavated profundity from banality. *No, the big buckle*, I thought, watching the woman in the glass room try to put my daughter in the carrier before she had the waistband fully cinched. I had to force myself to look away, and when I looked back my daughter was settled in the carrier. She looked peaceful.

It was hard to say which stung more: watching the silent movie in which she was unhappy about being mothered by another woman, or the one in which it was going just fine.

That fall, I returned to my teaching job. Though I felt a certain pressure to tell people I hated going back to work, in truth it felt sturdy and *right* to start teaching again. It felt good to wear something besides the same frayed pair of jeggings I'd been wearing for months, with flannel shirts that were easy to unbutton for nursing.

Each morning, I brought two bags on the subway. One was packed with teaching supplies—my laptop, my printed lessons for a seminar called Writing the Body—and the other was full of pumping supplies: flanges, tubes, plastic pouches, plastic bottles, and the hard-shelled yellow engine of the pump itself, which purred contentedly until I cranked it up to the highest setting and it started to wheeze like a little old man, pawing at my nipples with his plastic flange-hands.

In class, I spoke to my students about breaking open the anecdotal stories we all told ourselves and others about our lives. You have to uproot the cocktail-party story, I said, in order to get at the more complicated version lurking beneath it: the nostalgia under the anger, the fear beneath the ambition. I didn't want their breakups summarized, I wanted specifics—wanted them stress-eating cookies as big as their palms, their fingers smelling like iron after leaning against an ex's rusty fire escape.

It felt almost like drag, going to work and becoming a better incarnation of myself for my students: generous, enthusiastic, always giving them the benefit of the doubt. I knew I wasn't offering these things to C anymore, that I was hardening myself in order to summon the resolve to leave.

After class, I pumped at the desk in my shared office and then washed the supplies in the tiny sink of our two-stall communal bathroom. A line always formed behind me, students who were running late for class. "I'm so sorry," I told them, and sometimes just let them cut in to wash their hands among the clutter of my milk-streaked instruments. Once I was done, I shook off everything, little droplets flying everywhere, then tore off a small Nordic forest's worth of paper towels, and cradled all the wet supplies in my arms like an unruly baby made of ten different pieces. Back in my office, I covered my desk with the paper towels and held conferences with students as the plastic parts dried between us. This was hardly professional, but there wasn't a clear alternative in sight.

That term, a very nice male professor was scheduled to occupy our shared office during the hour following my three-hour workshop. This was just when I most needed to pump.

For a few weeks, I tried using another office, but after a colleague walked in on me with my shirt off and the plastic flanges heaving against my bare chest, I decided to ask the male professor if he'd be willing to use another office for that hour. *Whatever you do*, I told myself before I approached him, *don't apologize*.

When I finally stopped him in the hallway, I started by saying, "I'm so sorry." Then I asked if I could use our office to pump.

He frowned slightly, taking in the request, then his features settled into a genial, accommodating smile. "It's tricky, right?" he said. "We're all in the same boat."

I was quiet for a moment. Which boat did he mean?

"We're all dealing with this office shortage," he said. "We're all trying to make the best of it."

I wanted to say, *Yes, but I'm making the best of it with my breast pump*. Instead, I said, "It would really mean a lot to me." As if it were a personal favor. When I knew it wasn't my fault, or his fault. It was the institution's fault, making women run around begging for the basic things their bodies needed.

He was quite gracious about it, and I was grateful. But I was suspicious of my gratitude, which seemed like the product of a system that makes it difficult for mothers to work, and then asks them to feel thankful every time it's made incrementally less difficult. I tried to imagine being a student looking for space to pump, or an adjunct teacher worried about getting asked back. Or a maintenance worker. Which is to say, we aren't all in the same boat.

Still, it made me smile to conjure an image of this impossible boat: men and women alike hooked up to breast pumps all day long, tits out in the sun, squinting against the salt breeze, fortifying themselves with granola bars, pumping and pumping away.

A month later, I took the baby to a college reading, at the invitation of an old friend who was now a professor. Back in our college days I'd had a crush on this friend. There was a night we kissed, though I was so drunk I couldn't exactly remember. What I did remember was slow dancing on a sticky wooden floor, and how the straps of my dress kept falling down and he kept gently pulling them up again. The following morning, I woke up wondering what would happen next, because I was a daydreamer and in my daydreams many things had already happened between us. But nothing happened next. Or, rather, this happened next: we were friends for twenty years; we were never together; I married someone else. Being an adult meant watching many possible versions of yourself whittle into just one.

On this trip, my friend picked us up—me and the baby—from our retro motor lodge on a hill. It was raining, and our room stank faintly of urine from a trash bin full of wet diapers. There was also a burnt smell from the hair dryer blowing on my sopping canvas sneakers. My friend took us to a museum, and when I nursed in its elegant restaurant—my daughter smearing pasta sauce across the crisp white napkins with her tiny fingers—it almost felt like squandering an opportunity, that during all these years he'd seen my breasts only when I was nursing or drunk.

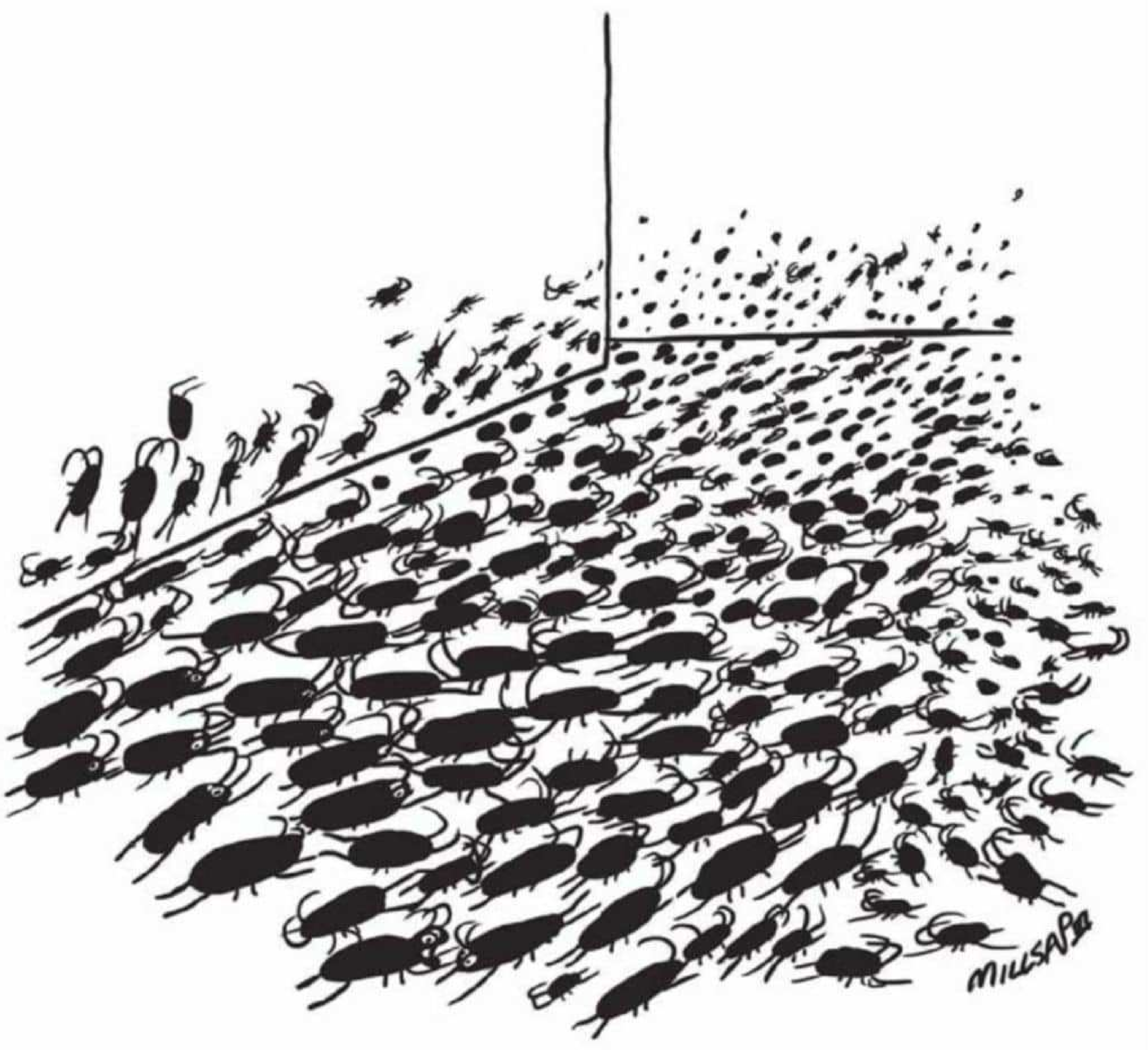
On the stairs outside the museum, a woman stopped us to say we had a beautiful son, a beautiful family. At the time, we joked about how much she'd got wrong in a single sentence. But in the dark hotel room that night, with my daughter sleeping beside me, it ached when I let myself glimpse, just for a moment, that alternative reality she'd seen—the possibility of another life.

Every day that fall, I asked myself some permutation of the same questions. Did honoring my vows mean figuring out how to make a home with C's anger? What did I owe his pain? What did I owe my daughter? When I told myself she would get better versions of both her parents if we did not live together, was I simply telling myself a story that would justify the choice I already wanted to make?

While I was pregnant—and before that, when we were trying—I'd hoped that having a baby would force us to find a better iteration of our relationship. But it seemed to be doing almost the opposite: clarifying my sense that this home was not the home I wanted her to know. In therapy, I started saying this to C, trying to let him know how far away from him I'd got, rather than keeping it to myself.

During a conversation years earlier, when I was already unhappy enough to consider leaving, I told my friend Harriet that I was worried about the harm I would cause if I left. She told me I was right to worry. I would cause harm. She also told me no one moves through this world without causing harm. I'd wanted her to say, *Don't be crazy! You won't cause any harm!* Or, at least, *You're in so much pain, you deserve to cause harm!*

But she hadn't said either of those things. What she said instead was neither condemnation nor absolution. It was just this: You have to claim responsibility for the harm you cause. You have to believe it's necessary.



"How many of us make an infestation?"

That winter, I was one of the officiants at my friend Colleen's wedding, at a lodge in the Canadian Rockies. C did not come, which was a bittersweet relief. I wouldn't have known how to sit beside him and listen to other people declare their faith in a shared life.

In the previous months, I'd had many conversations with Colleen about her vows. Traditional vows said, *Till death do us part*, but she wanted to promise something closer to this: *I will do everything I possibly can to keep creating a version of this marriage that will work.* As we talked about her vows, I remembered my own—kept asking myself, *How do you know when a marriage is no longer possible to save*?

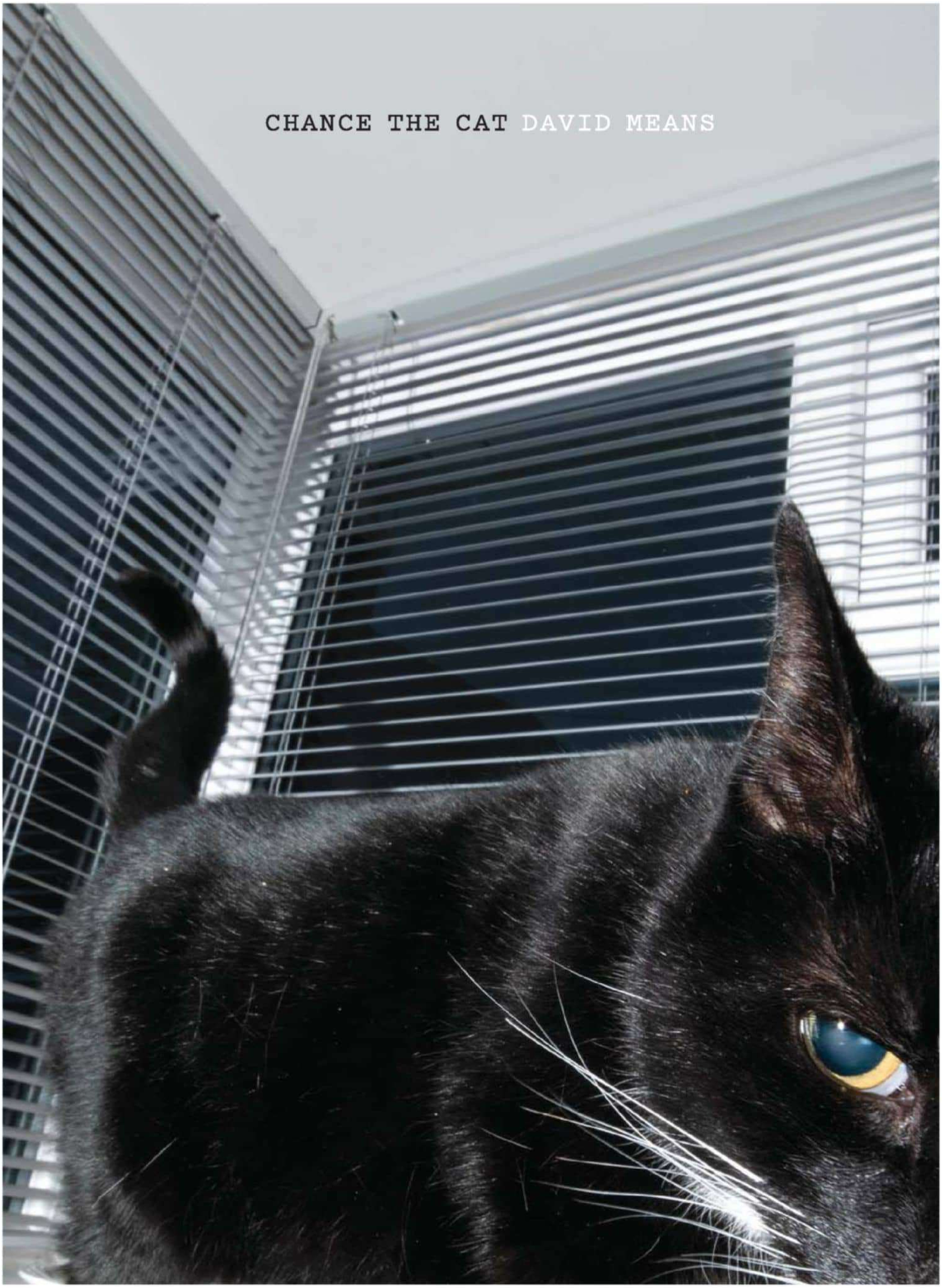
Talking about wedding vows was like donning a hair shirt. Some inner voice—or was it his?—shamed me, over and over again. Don't get married if you don't mean it. Don't get married if you are only capable of meaning something for a week, a month, a year, five years.

Up in the mountains, I ran out of baby-food pouches the day before the ceremony. So I walked into town to buy more, the baby snug against me in her carrier, bundled in an eggplant-purple snowsuit, swivelling her head like an owl to look at all the snowy trees. On the walk back, she cried because her cheeks were red and burning from the cold. Why hadn't I packed more pouches? Every time something went wrong, it was only my fault. I wanted a life that was ninety per cent thinking about the complexities of consciousness, and just ten per cent buying pouches of purée. But this was not the life I'd signed up for.

At the ceremony, I gave a speech to the assembled crowd. *Marriage is not just about continuing but reinventing. Always being at the brink of something new.* Delivering this ode, I felt like a fraud. I had reached the end of reinventing. A voice inside me said, *You are a liar. You have not done enough.* A week later, I would tell C—in our basement therapy—that I was done. At that wedding in the mountains, the words I'd offered as a homily had been an elegy hidden in plain sight. ♦

CHANCE THE CAT

DAVID MEANS



PHOTOGRAPH BY BOBBY BEASLEY

Does it matter that a cat story resides solely in the body of a cat, remaining neutral as the creature moves through the landscape, operating on pure instinct, and, no matter what, embodying the projected will of the human? There is little else that the cat can do. All one can do is attempt to watch the animal as it performs its actions, with time suspended and meaningless. As it does, the painful history from the first to the last, the dirt back roads, the chains, and the rattle of iron, are voided in the cat—that dusty old symbol, the red open mouth at the end of a Poe story, a freakish shadow, razor teeth crying behind a wall.

•

What matters is that they were walking that day in opposite directions along the same path, with the neo-Gothic buildings of the university framing a sombre Chicago sky. There was William's smile and then his voice as Kayla heard it for the first time. She was from a place called Sparks, not far from Reno, a neat little bungalow house on a street snaked with asphalt seam sealer. There was an exchange of words, an adjusting of bodies into casual positions and a forward movement, slightly dancelike, as they talked. It was his freckles, and the frankness of his eyes, and the commonality of the place where they met, too, the way their paths crossed into the initial physical contact—he was looking at his phone when he bumped into her, sent her staggering back—and the comic aspect of the way their bodies touched that afternoon.

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What matters is that a few weeks later the two of them found him on the corner of Fifty-third and Woodlawn, a street cat with matted black fur and a smear of white cutting across his face at an odd angle that broke the symmetry of his features but made him oddly beautiful. His paws were bloodied and his eyes bloodshot and, when she went to him, he let himself be lifted into her arms and then he relaxed, sagging. It was a cool fall night. "I want to keep him," she said, and he said, "Yeah, let's keep him, yes," and they took him to her apartment.

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Does it matter that, later, when Kayla was finished with her graduate work and was drafting an essay that drew, loosely, on her relationship with William, she wrote: *the cat was a bonding agent, a linguistic mode around an object, or an animal, or a work of art that allows for a bridge between profound differences in experience which appear on the lingual level in patterns of storytelling and in the tension which forms around a new type of structure*?

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What mattered was that after she'd edited that part of her essay, got rid of the lingo, it became obvious that having a cat had provided them with reasons and ways to talk to each other over the course of the fall, through the winter, and into the spring.

Does it matter that the cat was black with that white streak across his face, or that William was white with freckles and a small crescent scar above his eyebrow, from playing hockey, or that her skin was brown, or that he was studying Henry Louis Gates and writing a thesis on the theory of signification, turning his attention to how his type had taken to signifying, too, and that he tried this hypothesis out all the time and sounded like an idiot but that was also endearing somehow—at least those first few weeks—because he seemed aware of his own awareness in a funny way, dipping his head from side to side before laughing at himself? Or does it matter that she was doing her graduate work on Foucault, who famously had a cat?

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What mattered was that after bumping into each other they walked to the café next to the bookstore and had their first conversation in human language while the cat was still on the street, one of hundreds on Chicago's South Side that autumn who hunted small rodents and birds, and, on occasion, were fed by kindhearted professorial types who clucked and called and lured them with a saucer of milk.

•

Did it matter that as they sat having coffee that first day outside Seminary Co-op, William talked about A Tribe Called Quest and Q-Tip and Eric Dolphy and Cannonball Adderley, and then shifted to talk about growing up in a suburb north of Chicago, with a father who was a labor lawyer, and she noticed his ironic style in the way he adjusted his manner of speaking for her benefit? Or that she shrugged this off as something she'd heard a million times? Or that through the bushes, beyond the tables at the outdoor café, workers were repairing the university's Frank Lloyd Wright house, pushing wheelbarrows of bricks, pounding with hammers? Or that the sky that fall afternoon wasn't sombre at all but a pristine blue with puffy clouds—the blue and white of William's eyes—and that, looking into his eyes as he spoke, she saw snow on the mountains near Reno in the winter?

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Did it matter that William mentioned Frank Lloyd Wright and then listened as she explained how unimpressed she was with Fallingwater, how she felt that the structure clutching the rock with the meek waterfall passing beneath it somehow fit too neatly into nature and, for that reason, weirdly, pushed itself away from nature, and that really it was better to design things that stood in stark opposition to nature—she sipped her coffee and looked through the bushes—as a way of respecting the two things, somehow, and she let her thoughts trail off and he took over, trying to make a joke, saying, "I think we should dub him Frank Lloyd White because his designs didn't fucking function, were wasteful, and weren't built for comfort, which is what we really want, need," and then he laughed and reached up to move the long, loose lock of hair that flopped down across his forehead, taking it in his fingers and tugging it to the side, a gesture she'd see again and again that fall?

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What mattered was the way she carried his lame joke into the future and, one day, a few years later, found herself standing at the window of her new office at the University of Nevada, Reno, looking at the mountains and wondering how she might incorporate it into her essay.

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What mattered was that when she saw one of the workers, pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with bricks, she thought of her father in his hammock strung between two cottonwoods, one foot on the dusty ground, pushing, still dressed in his security-guard uniform, a white shirt and star-shaped badge, touching his mustache as he talked about the casino, a customer who misunderstood directions for how to get to Starbucks, came back around and berated him and then asked for directions again and went down the escalator only to return, minutes later, even redder in the face than before.

•

Did it matter that her father got quiet at that point and lifted his dangling leg into the hammock and lay with his arms behind his head and looked through the leaves at the sky and let it all just sink in while she gave him a push and watched him rock?

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What mattered was that while they were sitting in the café having that first talk, the cat—which at that point was unnamed—was curled up in a patch of sun out on Promontory Point, along the shore of Lake Michigan, resting, licking his paws as he kept his attention on birds that were bustling in the dirt, and felt tension gathering as he stretched out and stayed low and began to stalk, being cat and existing as cat, moving slowly, keeping close to the ground.

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What might matter is that the cat hunched alongside the waves crashing upon the rocky shore at the Point. The breeze carried the distinct aroma of fish, a scent he momentarily disregarded as his entire focus remained on that flock of birds, bathing in the dirt. Their wings emitted a soft whirring sound as they took flight, only to land once more. Consumed by cat sensations, he crept toward the birds, now and then pausing to crouch and remain motionless. A low growl escaped him as he patiently awaited the birds' obliviousness, their return to the dust, where they fluttered, chirping and tweeting loudly, until a human passerby startled them, causing them to take flight and forget the cat completely. And so he would wait again, perfectly immobile, until they descended, inching closer, repeating the routine. Meanwhile, Kayla and William sat in the café, engaging in conversation for the very first time.

Did it matter that later in the fall they took a train together to Michigan City, Indiana, where they rented an apartment for the weekend? They hauled their books and laptops, eager to write side by side in a quiet place with a view of the lake. During the train ride, the conductor came calling for tickets. He reached across to take William's ticket, leaning forward slightly, holding his ticket punch like a gun. Then, pointing it at Kayla, he said casually, "Having a nice day?" Her subsequent exchange with William didn't seem to matter much at the time, but it did later, when she was trying to remember the dynamic, writing: *Did you catch that shit? What shit? That shit from the conductor? I didn't see anything. What shit?*

•

What mattered was that at that moment, as they sat together on the train, the cat was back in the apartment on the South Side sitting on the couch, blinking his eyes—green flecked with brown, the color of pistachio ice cream—purring for no other reason than that a clean, hard slice of sunlight came through the window and struck his back and stayed there as he stretched his paws out, settling into the top edge of the couch, and he let his paws spread and dig as he settled, closing and opening his eyes, hearing cars pass by on the street and the sound of human voices and, from time to time, music rising and fading, into the resolute, complete self of cat while he also remained acutely on guard for any shift or change and, on hearing a bird outside, he twitched his ears to better catch what he sensed was sound that in no way meant anything beyond itself and then, closing his eyes again, he relaxed into sleep.

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Did it matter that one Sunday she sat in Valois Restaurant on Fifty-third Street, observing the churchgoers in their elegant hats, while William tried to engage her in a conversation about something Obama-related—the fact that the President used to eat there—and his thesis, and the concept of signification as defined by Gates? As he spoke, her thoughts drifted to her father one afternoon just before she left for college. He was bent over the back-yard grill, surrounded by smoke, talking to her about how, during his time stationed at the casino, he would watch people gimping and limping and hobbling through the hotel lobby. "One out of ten of those folks has a foot or leg problem, you know what I'm sayin'," he said, looking over at her while she gently swayed in the hammock. Then he laughed his big laugh filled with breath, throat, and smoke.

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What truly mattered was that her father's laugh, resting in the solitude of that long-ago afternoon, embraced by the gentle desert light and the sounds of a late-summer evening, brought a smile to her face as she sat at the table with William that morning. "What are you smiling about, Kayla?" "Nothing," she said.

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Did it matter that there were a few perfect days that would remain in her memory, days when they listened to music and shared ideas, days when they sat with the cat and William danced around the apartment, imitating his father's flat, secure, calm legal voice; days when the clear fall air came across the quad as they walked, as he told her about fishing trips to northern Wisconsin, clipping his voice in a way she liked; or how she reached down and pulled the threads from a hole in his jeans, spreading her fingers over his bony white kneecap?

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What mattered was that when she went back over things—afterward, in Reno—and tried to recall a particular perfect day, late in the fall, all she could remember was the way his tight, Midwestern voice had slipped into lecture mode as he talked about his research—theorizing about the so-called "signifying monkey." And the way he listened to her, not saying a word, just nodding his head, as she spoke about Foucault's theory of the panopticon and then waited for him to respond, watching as he gently forced the cat off his lap, stood, and began talking about how her work might—"yeah, man," he said—just might inform his own, so that he could take the idea of the panopticon and apply it to his theories about the jazz musicians

Chairs
a bar where everybody has a seat!
SARAH

sampled by Tribe who had, in their time, played music toward one another, as if in cells facing the center of the prison.

•

What mattered was the way William noticed a swampy smell that seeped up through the concrete on South Harper as they took a shortcut to campus one warm day, and the way he ordered her to stop, to hold still, saying "Stop, stand still," and insisted that she listen to the faint yet distinct hum of the nearby train tracks, to the way they emitted an electric zing sound between passing trains. When she confessed that she couldn't hear anything, he simply smiled at her and shrugged.

•

Does it matter that stories demand that one character take over another somehow, so that the burden falls unevenly? Right after Kayla left William, she thought about his inability to see her clearly, to reflect back the parts of herself that her mother, dying in a hospital bed when she was six, had given to her, smiling as she ran her fingers over Kayla's cheeks, a certain resolute tension in her mother's mouth, until tears slid down her cheeks. In the early days of the relationship, she'd told William about this, saying, "the tears my mother passed to me," and watched his pale, wintry blue eyes for his response.

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What matters is that human stories demand nuances of gesture, the touch of lips to lips, the way skin feels and the struggle to avoid cliché, until finally he's trying to describe how he sees the color of her skin, saying it's cocoa brown or burnished something—hickory or mahogany—and she tells him to shut up, lifting her voice, tightening the words, and then, as if to betray her own thought, kisses him and says it's O.K., she forgives him for his foolishness.

Did it matter that with snow falling on the streets and an unsettling silence covering the neighborhood, William lay in bed conjuring up a backstory for the cat, drawing inspiration from a song by Chance the Rapper that he loved, imagining the cat living the good life at Sixty-fifth and Ingleside? In his story, the cat ventured outside one afternoon to assert his territory, *to hunt his turf*, and, hearing that phrase, Kayla gently pressed her fingers against his lips, urging him to stop, and her fingers remained there as he continued to talk, and she felt the soft, moist air of his breath and then, as he continued talking, she got up from the bed and crossed the room to gaze out the window and beheld the creamy smoothness of the snowy street, flakes swirling under the street light and, on the corner, a Secret Service agent, stationed to protect President Obama's house on the opposite side, bracing against the wind, his shoulders epaulets of white.

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What mattered was that the cat slept peacefully at the end of the bed, undisturbed by the shifting sheets and the restless movement of human feet as they moaned and kicked that night. The cat fell into a chasm of sleep.

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What mattered was the inherent need all cats have to sleep, to curl up in a chosen spot and surrender themselves to deep slumber, although it could be inferred that most maintain a certain level of awareness, a tension—whiskers twitching, even during their restful states—opening their eyes to survey the scene before descending back into sleep. *But there are moments*—she wrote in her essay—*when fatigue overwhelms, leaving them drained, battered, and vulnerable as they plunge into a profound abyss of sleep that potentially exposes them to danger.*

•

What truly mattered was that whenever she imagined Chance's previous life she pictured him out on Promontory Point on a stormy day fending for himself in his own way—his fur bristling in the wind as he skillfully hunted along the breakwater for fish and birds—before, she imagined, venturing down the path and darting across Lake Shore Drive to enter their lives, diligently searching for them. That was the story she told when they attempted to piece together the fragments of the cat's life before they found him.

Did it matter that the Secret Service agent stationed on the corner on that snowy night was Black? His job involved stopping anyone who came into the neighborhood, to check them off a list, to keep his zone secure.

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What mattered was that the agent, Dwight Howard, who was assigned to stop and check anyone who entered the zone of the Obama house, would stand on the corner across from 1118 E. Hyde Park Boulevard, touching his earpiece, deliberately taking his time whenever he stopped Kayla, William, or both of them together. In his mind, thoughts swirled about *putting people through it*, a phrase commonly used in routine training.

NIGHT SEA, 1963

In this room, my loneliness doubles because the edges of the painting are no longer white. The real blue looks thicker than in the photos. The source of the blue is no longer here. What's left, just the thick beauty in front of me, the frayed edges like my filthy mouth for all to see. I still have my soul, but parts of it have begun to migrate onto beautiful things, like this blue. I leave some of my soul here, three lines up, fourth rectangle over from the right. My soul is made of words and cut glass. Lately, the glass keeps cutting the words. The most wounded words I've had since childhood choose to stay here. I console myself as I exit the room. The people in the room are unaware of what I've done. Some of my words have changed their minds and are trying to leave the room and follow me. I walk away, lighter, a smaller soul on my back. But thirty-three days later I can still hear them begging.

—Victoria Chang

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What mattered was that he recounted his regular encounters with the couple (Kayla and William) in great detail to his wife, Dara, observing her closely, searching for signs of judgment on her face as he talked about *putting the kid through it*, explaining that putting the kid through it meant taking extra care to stay alert, to avoid getting lazy, the way folks who operate trains in Japan are required to speak things out loud, even when they're alone in the train cab, verbalizing signals to avoid being careless, even when it seems redundant, and sticking to the book no matter what, even if you make a positive I.D. ahead of time, same thing the T.S.A. folks do when pulling randoms aside and frisking them, going through old ladies, little kids, the enfeebled, not for the sake of display but because it keeps you inside the reality of routine. ("You're just pulling power on folks and you know it and the agency knows it and the T.S.A. knows it, too, and the folks who are pulled aside know it the most," she told him.) And he'd tell her again how boring and dull things could get and how you had to do whatever you fucking had to do to keep it real. "You know me," he said. "You know me the same way the kid said I knew him."

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Without a word he looked down at the kid, who said again, "You know me," and he thought: *I do know you but I'm going to pretend not to know you because that's my job right now, son, and my job is not to see you as if I've seen you before, walking with your girlfriend to her apartment, but to see you afresh, as if for the first time, one stranger to the next, just as you over the years—fuck it, the centuries—have not seen me and never once pretended to even try to see me, as you stopped and put me through it, put all of us through it, and what I'm hoping you're feeling right now is the danger of being suspect by virtue of the fact that you happen to be coming down this street right now into federal space, son, looking the way you look with high-top sneakers and loping gait and your eyes startled with your sense of dignity.*

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What mattered was Simmons, his friend from their academy days, sharing a tale about his father, who claimed to have once worked security for James Brown, Simmons recounting how his father would stand with his back to the show, arms crossed and eyes forward, while James took off his fucking cape or fell into the arms of his handlers. Simmons talked about how his father was afraid to turn around because James would fire his ass, or fine him the way he fined his band members when they flubbed a note. There was another guy at the academy who claimed his father worked a Fenway Park gig, watching the crowd while the game played out behind him, standing with his arms folded, scanning for problems from one season to the next, never daring to turn around, to divert his attention, because "you turn and glance at the play and an asshole's gonna punch some other asshole is how it worked," that father used to say, and it was a phrase that Dwight would repeat again and again for the rest of his life, telling the story, just as he'd tell about the time the President, a year after Dwight finally got rotated to D.C., walked him through a bookstore and talked to him casually.

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Is it possible to describe the looks that Kayla gave this agent during those routine stops, watching his gaze shift between William and her? The subtle yet noticeable intensity in her eyes, a mix of curiosity and anticipation, as she observed the agent closely? She watched him fixate on William before flickering to her and returning just as quickly to William as he asked him for his I.D.

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What truly mattered was the moment when Kayla finally talked back to the agent, who had stopped them countless times over the months they had been living together, and said, "You should know us by now, with how often you stop us," and watched as he looked her over and assessed her Western way of speaking and then, as it seemed he had done so many times before, turned his attention to William, scanning him from his feet up to his head, taking in his tall and lanky frame before stating, "Just doing my job, Ma'am," twisting into that last word with his eyes hidden behind his sunglasses in a gesture that somehow made her sure that he had Googled William's name, researched his home in Wilmette—as she had—scrutinized the wide streets and the trees arching over the road, casting deep shadows over the pristine pavement, and the blue oval pools in the back yards, and maybe even knew that an owner of the Chicago Cubs lived down William's street, which was something that William mentioned whenever he spoke about home, so that it seemed to her in retrospect that this tidbit of information had permeated the air of the South Side, bouncing around, slipping into the small earpiece that the agent wore that afternoon and touched one last time, as if pushing a finger into her chest.

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What truly mattered was the agent's commitment to his duties and his catlike cool and calm and resolved stillness, which came from training and seemed natural to Kayla, because it was the same coolness that she vividly recalled seeing in her father one afternoon after school, when she paid him a surprise visit at the casino. Before he noticed her, she watched him standing alone in the hotel lobby, holding himself in the same exact manner as the agent on the sidewalk now, his legs spread, his impeccably polished shoes planted firmly on the maroon carpeting that stank of smoke, scanning the room for action with the same stoic strength and readiness to face whatever lay ahead.

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What truly mattered was that she could easily imagine—and did so later—the agent stationed inside the Obamas' house, in the quiet and solitude behind its tall fence. She imagined him moving silently from room to room, brushing his hand lightly over certain objects, photos in frames, hairbrushes on dresser tops, beds with spreads tight and smooth. She imagined him navigating the rooms with grace, his movements reverent and respectful.

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What matters is the daunting challenge of describing the intricate dynamic that unfolded between Kayla and the agent during those recurring stops, beginning in the fall and continuing through the winter and into the spring, and the way the essence of the stops was conveyed through glances and small gestures. Dwight pausing to take off his sunglasses, exposing his gaze, waiting with measured deliberation before reaching out to take her license between his long, lean fingers, as if it were something of both insignificance and immense value, holding it like a piece of trash, or a delicate square of lace, before handing it slowly back to her and watching as she, with just as much deliberation, returned it to her wallet, snapped her wallet shut, and then placed the wallet in her purse, snapping that shut in turn and putting the strap back over her shoulder before looking at him again, and giving him one of her fake smiles.

Did it matter that one afternoon, William, alone and exasperated, said to the agent, "Come on, man, for fuck's sake, you know me, man," and that the agent shook his head and whispered "Just doing my job," before he asked for William's backpack and took his time rummaging through it, removing a pack of chewing gum and a laptop before tapping his earpiece and calling for a double check on one William Wilson, waiting for a confirmation on the name while they both stood and gazed at the house, the imposing iron fence, and the lush, deep-green lawn? In that moment, the agent and William shared a glance as a plane ascended from Midway Airport, the sound fading away with the passing of a booming car beat. It was a fleeting moment of unity, a brief interlude within their shared solitude.

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Did it matter that on that day, before he was stopped, William had instinctively adjusted his backpack strap over one shoulder and retrieved his wallet from his pocket, getting his license ready before the agent stopped him? Or that Dwight had been thinking back to the way his father liked to work underneath his car in the driveway on Sunday afternoons, his long legs sticking out, the clink of wrenches hitting the blacktop, and the way his father cleaned his nails with toothpicks over the kitchen sink when he came home from the shop on weekdays, and as he was having these thoughts he turned and scanned and saw the kid down the street approaching with his license out and ready?

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What mattered was that as he *put the kid through it* he felt the terror of something inside his loss and against his will, against his sense of himself as a trained professional, he felt a connection between that moment and the accident that had taken his father, as if the kid in front of him had kicked the concrete block out from behind the tire that afternoon so that the car slid down the ramp and crushed his father's body. He snatched the kid's license. When the kid said, "Come on, sir, I mean Jesus, you know who I am. Do we have to go through this every single time I go home?," he told him to shut up and held his license up as if he'd never seen it before and took his sweet fucking time while, overhead, a jet coming in to land at Midway roared, and when the kid—his eyes fearful and red splotches forming on his cheeks—spoke again, saying, "I know you're just doing your job but, man, sir, you know this is ridiculous," he raised his head and told him again to shut up and took his backpack and went through it a second time, removing his laptop, another pack of gum, his phone, and when the clearance of the name came back from HQ he tapped his earpiece, pretended not to hear, and held him as long as he could.

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What mattered was the shaky way William crossed the street after being released—his shoulders slouched under the burden of his backpack straps, his legs shuddering slightly, his hands quivering as he tried to get the key into the door and then held it open, pausing to look back at the agent, who was still watching him, staring his way while the cat slipped around his legs and darted, unseen, into the bushes and then, with sweeping bounds, passed through a gap in the fence, stopping for a moment to take in the world, before strutting along the sidewalk in the direction of the lake.

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What mattered in the end was that Kayla found a way to get the cat to fit into her essay, with his white paws and his off-kilter smear of white across one eye and his pink mouth. And, fuck it, the way the song by Chance the Rapper, "65th & Ingleside," hit you and made you want to create something not so much because it was a great song but because of the repetition of that address, that specific locale, although you'd later find out that Chance the Rapper was considered uncool, unhip at that time, and you'd feel the cat had a way of drawing the light out of everything because he was so far from human, beyond the target of creation, and you had to keep working to twist the story back to Kayla and William but found yourself slinking, lurking, trailing them as they searched block by block, even stopping to ask the agent if he'd seen the cat, noting the slight smile he gave, lifting just one corner of his mouth, before he said, "No, no cat like that as far as I can remember," and turned and walked away, and then a storm came through later that afternoon, driving the lake into a fury while they searched at the Point, calling his name. They put up signs around the campus, walking through the quad. They placed a saucer of milk, a little blue bowl, outside the sliding door, waiting and watching it day after day.

In the end, what mattered was that when they lost the cat the spark was gone, the electricity of those first few months of the relationship. At the heart of the breakup, buried deep and unspoken, was the untold truth—William's failure to tell her about the encounter with the agent and the overwhelming feeling he had at the apartment door that day, his hand trembling with the key, holding the door open too long, giving Chance a chance to slip away. Later, when she was teaching in Reno, standing in her office looking out at the campus, with mostly new buildings—and catching glints of sunlight in the snow on the mountains—she'd ponder the way everything had fallen apart after Chance disappeared, leaving them alone without a bonding agent.

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In the end, what mattered was the story *they* created together, imagining the cat wandering to the south until, one day, he was at a house that *you* saw from the train, gazing into the back yards and the streets, mostly empty, on hot summer afternoons, noting the windows that were covered with bars and the ones that were boarded, and the way the streets seemed to stretch in the shimmering heat—a few trees still thriving, casting deep shadows of cool—and, in particular, a specific house with a tidy yard, a fence, a neat house with a clothesline and laundry hanging and an older woman leaning over a basket, stopping to look up.

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In the end, follow the cat to that very house and observe as the lady becomes aware of his presence in her back yard—yet another stray. Watch as she goes inside briefly, only to reëmerge with a saucer in hand—a delicate blue with a slender band of white—and places it gently on the ground. Watch as the cat, with his wonderful twists of tongue, laps the milk into his mouth and then sits and raises a paw to meticulously groom himself. Listen to the woman as she makes a soft clicking sound, beckoning the cat closer, engaging in a casual conversation about what a beautiful day it is, a lovely singsong of isolation as the cat twirls around her legs and eventually pauses, raising his head to meet her eyes with his vibrant green eyes, while his purring is loud enough to hear over the distant thrum of the expressway beyond the railroad tracks.

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Watch as she takes the cat inside and searches through the cupboards, her hands shifting through cans until she finds a tin of sardines—left over from the days when her husband was still alive, before he was killed in the driveway, crushed when a block of concrete came loose and the car rolled down the ramp. Watch and understand that the story ends in the safety of a house, inside a certain silence that you yearned for as you listened to Kayla and William's arguments about their research, about their lives, as they attempted to build something meaningful around the cat's absence.

•

Watch while Kayla wrestles with the impulse to blame William for letting the cat escape, while he, in turn, goes to great lengths to avoid any mention of the agent or the encounter that afternoon. He never shares the details with her, so his inner life disappears from view, preventing you from entering his mind. Maybe you don't want to because his mind is shamefully close to your own, yet when you do try to catch his thoughts, all you find are muddled emotions rooted in fear and a lingering sense of shame about being targeted by the agent—an idea he swiftly pushes aside, replacing it with the notion that the agent was simply doing his job.

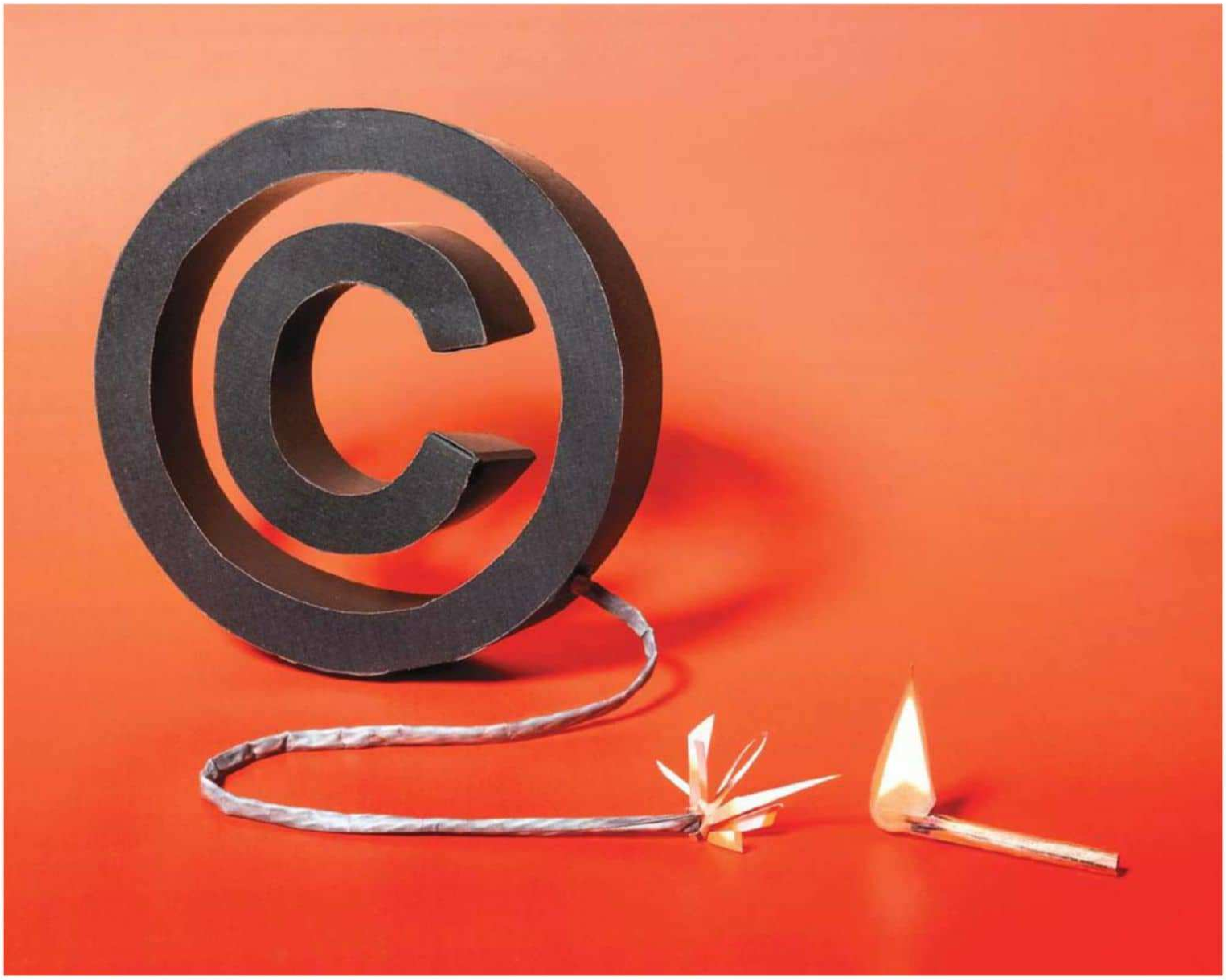
•

In the end what matters is the way the house and the saucer of milk and the old lady were something they had made up together, one last story to talk about, a story to make it easier to let go by pretending that Chance was alive and happy, tucked into a safe place forever.

•

In the end, the cat carries their story away, embodying it with nimble paws and a heightened awareness of everyday movements. It is something that only the cat can carry, the burden, enigma, and even terror of love that Kayla experienced the afternoon she parted ways with William, seeing the buds on the trees shaking in the breeze from Lake Michigan, and, as she walked back to her apartment, an absurd, lingering pile of late-spring snow slowly melting, pocked and honeycombed into strange structures, hazed with dirt, in a parking lot in South Side Chicago. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
David Means on writing animals truthfully.



A CRITIC AT LARGE

IS A.I. THE DEATH OF I.P.?

The copyright wars, revised and expanded.

BY LOUIS MENAND

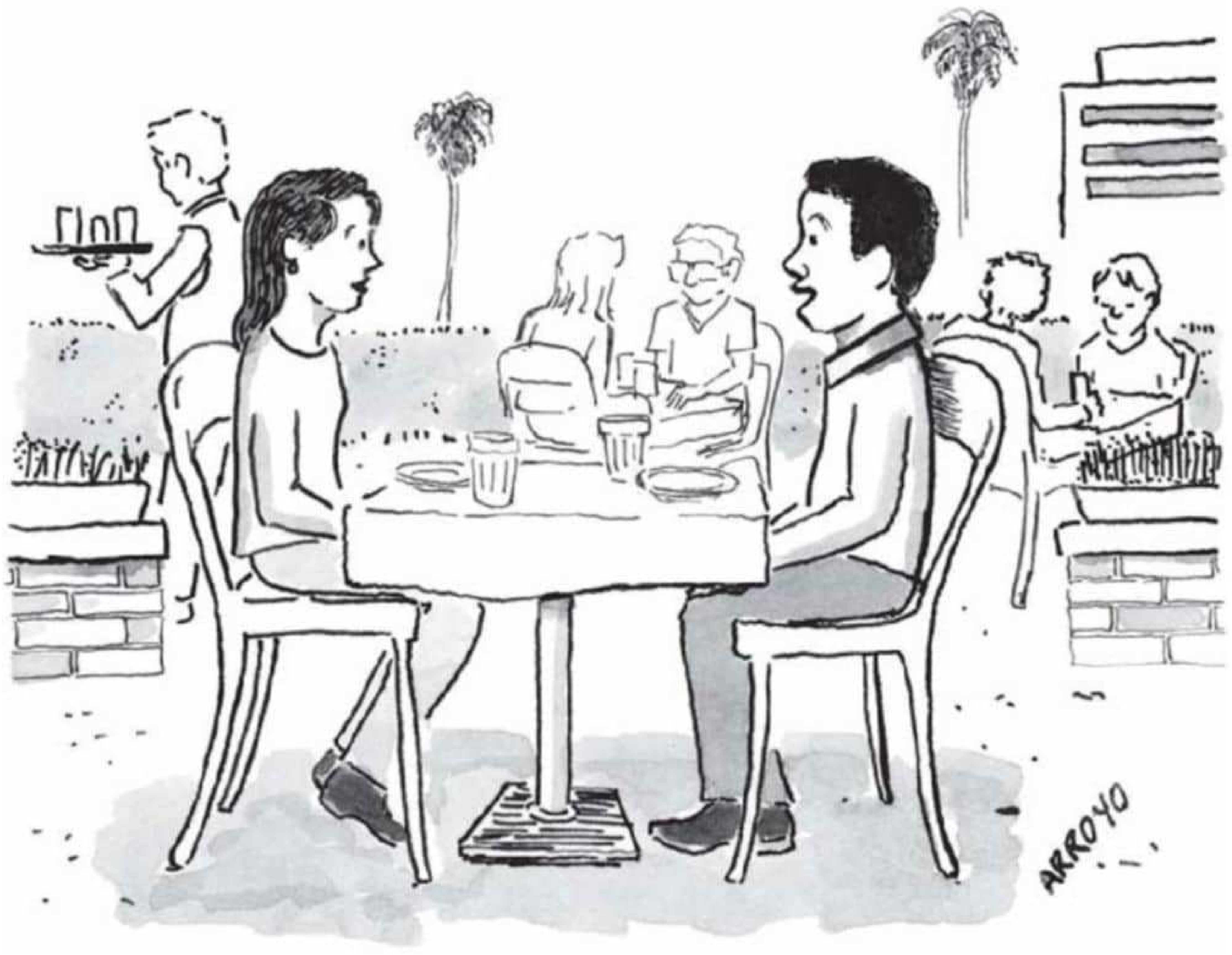
Intellectual property accounts for some or all of the wealth of at least half of the world's fifty richest people, and it has been estimated to account for fifty-two per cent of the value of U.S. merchandise exports. I.P. is the new oil. Nations sitting on a lot of it are making money selling it to nations that have relatively little. It's therefore in a country's interest to protect the intellectual property of its businesses.

But every right is also a prohibition. My right of ownership of some piece of intellectual property bars everyone else from using that property without my consent. I.P. rights have an economic value but a social cost. Is that cost too high?

I.P. ownership comes in several legal varieties: copyrights, patents, design rights, publicity rights, and trademarks. And it's everywhere you look. United Parcel Service has a trademark on the shade of brown it paints its delivery trucks. If you paint your delivery trucks the same color, UPS can get a court to make you repaint them. Coca-Cola owns the design rights to the Coke bottle: same

All new creations derive from existing creations; the line between influence and infringement has always been contested.

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN DENZER



"What a coincidence—I'm an Aries who doesn't want to die alone, too."

• •

deal. Some models of the Apple Watch were taken off the market this past Christmas after the United States International Trade Commission determined that Apple had violated the patent rights of a medical-device firm called Masimo. (A court subsequently paused the ban.)

In 2021, the N.C.A.A. began allowing college athletes to market their name, image, and likeness (N.I.L., the three elements of the right of publicity). Caitlin Clark, the University of Iowa women's-basketball star, has an N.I.L. valued at around eight hundred thousand dollars a year. If you think there might conceivably be a gender gap here: LeBron James's son Bronny, who played his first collegiate game on December 10th and scored four points in a losing effort, has an N.I.L. currently valued at $5.9 million.

Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and Stevie Nicks are among a number of artists who have recently sold the rights to some or all of their songs. Virtually every song that Bruce Springsteen has ever written is now owned by Sony, which is reported to have paid five hundred and fifty million dollars for the catalogue. Because the copyright clock does not start ticking until the demise of the creator, Sony could own those rights until past the end of the century. The longer the Boss lives, the richer Sony gets.

David Bellos and Alexandre Montagu use the story of Sony's big Springsteen buy to lead off their lively, opinionated, and ultra-timely book, "Who Owns This Sentence? A History of Copyrights and Wrongs" (Norton), because it epitomizes the trend that led them to write it. The rights to a vast amount of created material—music, movies, books, art, games, computer software, scholarly articles, just about any cultural product people will pay to consume—are increasingly owned by a small number of large corporations and are not due to expire for a long time.

So what? There is little danger that Sony will keep Bruce Springsteen's songs locked up. On the contrary, it is likely that, from now until 2100 or so, it will be impossible to escape the sound of Springsteen's voice, because Sony needs to find lots of ways to recoup its investment. Sony enjoys no benefit from sitting on its property, and the music costs it almost nothing to disseminate. The company just needs someone to deposit the checks.

Sony will collect many of those checks from people like you and me. Our contribution will come out of things like the subscription and downloading fees we pay our music-streaming services. Considering the amount of music those services give us access to, a lifetime of Springsteen is costing us pennies. But there are some six hundred and sixteen million subscribers to music-streaming services out there—the number has more than doubled in the past four years, which is why all these catalogue sales are happening now—so the math looks good for Sony.

There are other lucrative revenue streams. Car manufacturers have been trying to buy a license to use "Born to Run" in their commercials almost since the song was released, in 1975. Unless Springsteen, who has so far largely avoided endorsements, attached conditions to the sale, which seems unlikely given the dollars on the table, their day has probably arrived.

Bellos, a comparative-literature professor at Princeton, and Montagu, an intellectual-property lawyer, find this kind of rent-seeking objectionable. They complain that corporate copyright owners "strut the world stage as the new barons of the twenty-first century," and they call copyright "the biggest money machine the world has seen." They point out that, at a time when corporate ownership of copyrights has boomed, the income of authors, apart from a few superstars, has been falling. They think that I.P. law is not a set of rules protecting individual rights so much as a regulatory instrument for business.

But what Bellos and Montagu are ultimately distressed about isn't that businesses like Sony are sucking in large sums for the right to play music they didn't create, or that you and I have to pay to listen to it. We always had to pay to listen to it. The problem, as they see it, is that corporate control of cultural capital robs the commons.

In an important sense, when Bruce Springsteen releases a song or Jorie Graham publishes a poem, it belongs to all the world. Musical compositions, poems, works of art, books, TikTok videos—every type of cultural product is a public good. Our species draws upon them for pleasure, for edification, for inspiration and motivation, and sometimes for a cheesy simulacrum of such things. Because of the digital revolution, more of these goods are available to more people at less cost than ever. And we can do almost anything we like with them. We can listen to the songs or read the poems as often as we want, and they can excite us to create songs and poems of our own. What we cannot do, for a finite period of time, is put copies of those things on the market.

That period is set by Congress, under a power enumerated in Article I of the Constitution: "To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries." The first federal copyright act, passed in 1790, set the term of copyright at fourteen years from the date when a work was submitted for registration, renewable for another fourteen years.

You no longer have to register a work to hold its copyright. And the duration of that copyright has been extended several times. Since 1978, it has been seventy years from the death of the creator. For "corporate authors"—that is, companies that pay employees to make stuff (known as "work for hire")—it is now ninety-five years from the date of publication or a hundred and twenty years from the date of creation, whichever is shorter. Mickey Mouse, who was first "published" in 1928, entered the public domain at the beginning of this year—but only in his 1928 form. Updated Mickeys are still protected. In short, by the time a work created today enters the public domain, most of us will be dead. Many of us will be very dead.

For you (probably) and me (definitely), the rights to our creations are not worth much money to anyone but ourselves. But, if you are the guy who wrote "Born to Run," it is prudent to assign your rights to an entity that can pay you while you are alive some considerable portion of what your songs will be worth long after you are not. Bellos and Montagu argue that copyright law, originally enacted in Britain in the eighteenth century to protect publishers (and, to some extent, writers) from pirates, has evolved into a protection for corporate colossi with global reach. The law today treats companies as "authors," and classifies things like the source code of software as "literary works," giving software a much longer period of protection than it would have if it were classified only as an invention and eligible for a patent (now good for twenty years, with some exceptions).

Bellos and Montagu agree with many critics of contemporary copyright law that the current term of copyright is absurd. Often, we are locking away indefinitely stuff whose rights are owned by someone—an heir, an estate, some company that bought them along with other assets in a package—but no one knows who. For fear of a lawsuit, that material remains in a vault. A lot of video footage falls into this category, as do countless books that are out of print and music that can no longer be purchased in any format (much of Motown, for instance). There is no "use it or lose it" provision in copyright law.

Rights-owning heirs can be quite controlling, too. Martin Luther King, Jr.,'s family, along with EMI Music Publishing, owns the rights to film and audio recordings of the "I Have a Dream" speech. In 1996, the King family sued CBS for using portions of the speech without permission—even though it was CBS that made the film for which King's heirs were charging a licensing fee. "It has to do with the principle that if you make a dollar, I should make a dime" is how King's son Dexter explained the thinking. An initial verdict for CBS was overturned on appeal, and the Kings settled for a cash payment (which evidently took the form of a contribution to the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change and thus was tax deductible). CBS can afford the litigation. The average person cannot.

Corporations themselves can squeeze you shamelessly. Bellos and Montagu tell the story of a documentary filmmaker who shot a scene in which a group of workers were sitting around playing a board game with a television set on in the background. The TV happened to be showing "The Simpsons," and the filmmaker applied for permission to use the four seconds of the "Simpsons" episode that was visible in the shot. The studio wanted ten thousand dollars.

A particularly notorious "background" lawsuit was the "Dancing Baby" case. At issue was a twenty-nine-second YouTube video a mother had taken of her thirteen-month-old bouncing up and down to a Prince song, which is indistinctly audible for approximately twenty seconds. In 2007, Prince's label alleged copyright infringement and forced YouTube to take down the video. The case ended up in court. The baby's mother, Stephanie Lenz, prevailed in a lawsuit, but the litigation took a decade. That's why an author who wants to reproduce a photograph in a book would, if the photograph includes a painting in the background, even a fragment, be well advised to get permission not just from the photograph's rights holder but from the painting's.

What makes this ridiculous is that most of the photographs you see in books are on the Web, where they can be viewed by billions of people for nothing. But authors have to pay a fee, often hundreds of dollars for a single image, to reproduce them in a work that will be read by, with luck, ten or twenty thousand people. The major rent seeker here is Getty Images, which, after buying up most of its rivals, now controls more than four hundred and seventy-seven million "assets"—stock images, editorial photography, video, and music—and is worth five billion dollars. If you want to reprint a news photograph, chances are that Getty controls the rights.

Most litigation over copyright, like Lenz's suit, involves a term that has eluded precise judicial definition: fair use. Fair use is where the commons enters the picture. When Ezra Pound said "Make It New," he meant that putting old expressions to new uses is how civilizations evolve. The higher the firewall protecting the old expressions, the less dynamic the culture has a chance to be.

As Bellos and Montagu repeatedly point out, all new creations derive from existing creations. In our head when we write a poem or make a movie are all the poems we have read or movies we have seen. Philosophers build on the work of prior philosophers; historians rely on other historians. The same principle applies to TikTok videos. The same principle applies, really, to life. Living is a group effort.

The no man's land between acceptable borrowing and penalizable theft is therefore where most copyright wars are waged. One thing that makes borrowing legal is a finding that the use of the original material is "transformative," but that term does not appear in any statute. It's a judge-made standard and plainly subjective. Fair-use litigation can make your head spin, not just because the claims of infringement often seem far-fetched—where is the damage to the rights holder, exactly?—but because the outcomes are unpredictable. And unpredictability is bad for business.

The publisher of "The Wind Done Gone," a 2001 retelling, by Alice Randall, of Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind" from the perspective of a Black character, was sued for infringement by the owner of the Mitchell estate. The parties reached a settlement when Randall's publisher, Houghton Mifflin, agreed to make a contribution to Morehouse College (a peculiar outcome, as though the estate of the author of "Gone with the Wind" were somehow the party that stood for improving the life chances of Black Americans). Then there's the case of Demetrious Polychron, a Tolkien fan who was recently barred from distributing his sequel to "The Lord of the Rings," titled "The Fellowship of the King." Polychron had approached the Tolkien estate for permission and had been turned down, whereupon he self-published his book anyway, as the estate learned when it turned up for sale on Amazon.

In Randall's case, Houghton Mifflin argued that the new novel represented a transformative use of Mitchell's material because it told the story from a new perspective. It was plainly not written in the spirit of the original. In Polychron's, the sequel was purposely faithful to the original. He called it "picture-perfect," and it was clearly intended to be read as though Tolkien had written it himself. Polychron also brought his troubles on himself by first suing the Tolkien estate and Amazon for stealing from his book for the Amazon series "The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power." The suit was deemed "frivolous and unreasonably filed," and it invited the successful countersuit.

"My entire life flashed before my eyes, and I was folding laundry half the time."

Pop art, from Andy Warhol to Jeff Koons, is a lively arena for fair-use litigation, since the art deals explicitly with appropriated images. Very little is obviously "transformed." Last spring, in Andy Warhol Foundation v. Goldsmith, the Supreme Court ruled that the foundation could not license the use of a Warhol work—featuring Prince, as it happens—that was silk-screened from a photograph by Lynn Goldsmith, a professional photographer.

The Court's opinion, by Justice Sonia Sotomayor, largely restricted itself to the question of who had the right to license the image for use as a magazine illustration. It did not address the potentially explosive art-market question of whether Warhol's Prince silk screens themselves (there are fourteen, plus two pencil drawings) are covered by fair use. Following his "Campbell's Soup Cans" exhibition, in 1962, much of Warhol's art reproduced images and designs made by other people. Are those works "transformative" because they're Warhols? If I did the same thing, could I claim fair use?

The real circus act in copyright law, currently, is pop music. Pop is a highly formulaic art, and some amount of copying is pretty much inevitable. Most twelve-bar blues music is based on the same three chords. Much of jazz is built from the chord progression known as "rhythm changes." Folk has a certain sound; rock has a certain sound; country has a certain sound. These sounds are created from a vocal and instrumental palette specific to each genre, and each genre has its own themes, tropes, imagery.

This is because although originality has high value in the fine arts, imitation—or, more precisely, imitation with a difference—has high value in entertainment media. People like the music they already like. Movies, too. If the first "Die Hard" is a hit, there is a sequel—in fact, four sequels. It's the "Send more Chuck Berry" syndrome, the theory behind Pandora. Listeners want songs that sound like songs they enjoy, and a hit song spawns soundalikes seeking to cash in on what people are buying.

The insane part of all this is that I can record a cover—that is, a copy—of "Born to Run" without any permission at all. The legal requirement is only that I notify the rights holder and pay a royalty set by statute, which is currently about thirty-seven cents per sale for a three-minute song. Unsurprisingly, a huge portion of the pop repertoire therefore is covers. There are at least fifty covers of "Born to Run," including one by the London Symphony Orchestra. There are more than fifteen hundred Bob Dylan covers. There were six versions of "Try a Little Tenderness" before Otis Redding made his immortal 1966 recording with Booker T. & the M.G.s, a rendition without which the lives of many of us would be poorer.

But if I write a song that simply shares a few musical elements with "Born to Run"—"substantial similarity" is the legal standard—I could be in trouble. The similarity does not have to be deliberate. George Harrison was found liable for "subconscious" infringement when he used chords from the Chiffons' hit "He's So Fine," from 1963, in his 1970 song "My Sweet Lord," and had to pay five hundred and eighty-seven thousand dollars. Harrison knew that "this combination of sounds would work," the judge wrote, because it had already worked. Yes, that seems to be the way the music business operates.

To be found liable for subconscious infringement, you do at least have to have heard the song you're accused of stealing from. In 1983, a jury found that the Bee Gees had borrowed illegally from a song by Roland Selle called "Let It End" when they wrote "How Deep Is Your Love," but the verdict was thrown out on appeal because the plaintiff had not established that the Bee Gees could have heard his song, which he had distributed as a demo. The initial finding of "substantial similarity" was purely serendipitous.

In 2015, a jury decided that Robin Thicke and Pharrell Williams had copied Marvin Gaye's "Got to Give It Up" in their hit "Blurred Lines." Although the question of whether there were specific musical elements in common was contested, the jury evidently thought that they had a similar "feel." Thicke and Williams had to pay the Gaye family $5.3 million plus fifty per cent of future revenues.

The finding shocked a lot of people in the legal and music worlds, and a backlash against the "Blurred Lines" verdict seems to have made it a little harder for music infringement claims to stick. The group Spirit had a plausible case that Led Zeppelin had borrowed the arpeggiated chords that open "Stairway to Heaven" from Spirit's "Taurus": the chords are not completely identical but they do sound a lot alike, and Led Zeppelin used to open for Spirit. Still, in 2016, a California jury sided with Led Zeppelin, in a verdict that survived appeal.

And, last spring, the singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran was found not liable for copying another Gaye song, "Let's Get It On." During the trial, Sheeran brought his guitar with him to the witness stand and demonstrated to the jury that the four-chord progression in his song was common in pop music. Sheeran is a charming fellow, and the jury was duly swayed. "I am unbelievably frustrated that baseless claims like this are allowed to go to court at all," he said after the trial. But the legal uncertainty is an incentive to sue, since settlement dollars can be significant. (If you lose, though, the Copyright Act gives the court the discretion to make you pay the defendant's attorney fees.)

The uncertainty exists because juries differ, but also because the goalposts move. The different results in the "Blurred Lines" and the "Stairway to Heaven" lawsuits had partly to do with something called the "inverse ratio" rule, a judge-made rule invented to establish the degree of similarity required for legal liability. Inverse ratio dictates that the more access the defendant had to the original work, the lower the bar for establishing substantial similarity. Which makes little sense. The court—the Ninth Circuit, where many entertainment-industry cases end up—applied the rule in the former case and then turned around and declared it void in the latter.

Judicial competence is also an issue. There is a special court for patent and trademark claims, which sits in Washington, D.C. But judges assigned in copyright cases generally know little about the fields in which fair-use concerns arise. This is why the matter of what's "transformative" is such a judicial gray area. In a rather heated dissent in the Warhol case, Elena Kagan complained that Justice Sotomayor and the rest of the majority had no understanding of art. To know why a Warhol silk screen counts as transformative, or to give musical definition to a song's "feel," you need a kind of expertise that most judges—most people—don't have.

Competence is also likely to be a factor in cases arising on the next frontier in I.P., artificial intelligence. Bellos and Montagu end their book with the intriguing suggestion that A.I. may be the technology that brings the whole legal structure of copyright down.

From a historical perspective, generative A.I. is just the latest in a line of innovations that have put pressure on copyright law. These include photography, which was not declared copyrightable until the second half of the nineteenth century; radio, which triggered a war between the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), which licenses performance rights for music, and the broadcast companies over whether on-air play of a song requires payment of a royalty (ASCAP won); and photocopying. Is a Xerox copy of an article or a book illegal under the terms of copyright law? How about a six-line poem? It is, after all, a copy, even if it was not made with a printing press.

The Internet spawned all kinds of methods for accessing copyrighted material and circumventing copyright claims. Napster, launched in 1999, is the landmark example. Its peer-to-peer file-sharing system was determined to be piracy, but Napster still revolutionized the music industry by moving it into the streaming business. Performance revenue aside, music income now comes primarily not from CD sales but from licensing deals. Spotify is a direct descendant of the Napster case.

On the other hand, in Authors Guild v. Google, decided in 2015, courts upheld the legality of Google Books, even though it is a Web site that was created by scanning tens of millions of books without permission from the copyright holders. That case didn't even go to trial. Google won in summary judgment under the principle of fair use, and an appeals court held that Google Books' copying had a "highly convincing transformative purpose" and did not constitute copyright infringement. The outcome portends trouble for parties with copyright cases against companies that use A.I.

Still, no one knows how courts will apply the current statutory authority—the Copyright Act of 1976 and subsequent amendments—to generative A.I., a technology whose capacities were barely contemplated in 1976. Apps like ChatGPT are large language models (L.L.M.s), meaning that they have "learned" by being "trained" on enormous amounts of digital information. What the models are "learning" are not even sentences but "tokens," which are often pieces of words. When functioning properly, a model predicts, based on a statistical calculation, what token comes next.

This has been mocked as simply an advanced form of autofill. But, when I write a sentence, I, too, am trying to guess the best next word. It just doesn't feel especially "auto." One big difference is that, since I fancy myself a writer, I am trying to *avoid*, wherever possible, the statistically most common solution.

It is thought that a significant percentage of the token sequences that the L.L.M.s have trained on come from the Web sites of news organizations, whose material is copyrighted. The models are also believed to train on text in so-called shadow libraries, like Library Genesis and Z-Library, which include millions of pages of copyrighted material. A key legal question is whether the training process has involved copying this text and, if so, whether any or all of this process is protected by fair use.

I.P. experts completely disagree about what the answer should be. There are multiple legal challenges under way, which will probably result in cases argued in different venues producing inconsistent results. Ideally, this is an area where Congress, under its Article I power, would decide on the rules, but Congress these days is not exactly a well-oiled legislative machine.

Courts have already ruled that search engines, like Google and Bing, which scour enormous amounts of copyrighted material on the Web, are protected by fair use, because the thumbnail images and text snippets they display when you conduct a search qualify as "transformative." Are generative-A.I. systems so different from search software in this respect?

The comedian and memoirist Sarah Silverman and two other writers have sued the tech companies Meta and OpenAI for copyright infringement. (Most of the suit was dismissed by a federal judge last November.) John Grisham and Jodi Picoult are part of a separate writers' lawsuit, and there are others. It's not obvious what sort of relief writers can ask for. Silverman's memoir is protected against piracy by copyright. Someone else can't print and sell a substantially similar work. But, in an L.L.M., her text is a drop in an ocean of digital data. There is no reason to think that well-known, best-selling writers such as Grisham and Picoult are somehow losing more to L.L.M.s than an equally prolific author of self-published guides to home repair is. Since A.I. technologies feed on the entire online universe of words and images, everyone, even if their creative activities are limited to taking selfies or posting tuna-casserole recipes, could sue. To an L.L.M., it's tokens all the way down.

But the lawsuits keep on coming. Last winter, Getty Images sued Stability AI for what it called "brazen theft and freeriding" on a "staggering scale." And, in December, the *Times* sued OpenAI and Microsoft, claiming that those companies are liable for "billions of dollars in statutory and actual damages" for their use of the *Times'* archives.

The *Times* claims, for example, that Bing, Microsoft's search engine, which uses OpenAI's ChatGPT, provided results that substantially copied verbatim from the paper's Wirecutter content, which makes money when readers use its links to sites where they can purchase recommended goods. (In effect, Bing visited the Wirecutter pages and then got the ChatGPT engine to paraphrase them closely.) The links were not included in Bing's version, and so the *Times* lost money.

Some of these legal challenges can be met by licensing agreements, which is how music companies responded to the Napster episode. The Associated Press has agreed to license the use of its reporting to ChatGPT, and additional licensing deals have been consummated or are in the works. Other kinds of guardrails around the use of A.I. in the workplace can be erected through collective bargaining, as happened this fall after the Writers Guild of America, which represents more than eleven thousand screenwriters, and the Screen Actors Guild went on strike. Might similar guardrails be used to protect—oh, I don't know—writers for weekly magazines?

Another question is whether works created by A.I. are themselves copyrightable. Last August, a federal court ruled that machine-made works are not copyrightable—in the court's words, that "human authorship is a bedrock requirement of copyright." But that conclusion is likely to be tested soon. After all, a camera is a machine. Why is it that, if I bring my Leica to a back-yard fireworks display, my photograph is eligible for copyright protection, but if I prompt Dall-E 3, an OpenAI service, to make me a photograph of fireworks, the image it produces might not be?

People loved the A.I.-generated version of Johnny Cash singing a Taylor Swift song, which was posted online last year by a person in Texas named Dustin Ballard. But who owns it? Could Taylor Swift sue? Probably not, since it's a cover. Does the Cash estate have an ownership claim? Not necessarily, since you can't copyright a style or a voice. Dustin Ballard? He neither composed nor performed the song. No one? Does it belong to all the world?

Some people may say that A.I. is robbing the commons. But A.I. is only doing what I do when I write a poem. It is reviewing all the poems it has encountered and using them to make something new. A.I. just "remembers" far more poems than I can, and it makes new poems a lot faster than I ever could. I don't need permission to read those older poems. Why should ChatGPT? Are we penalizing a chatbot for doing what all human beings do just because it does so more efficiently? If the results are banal, so are most poems. God knows mine are.

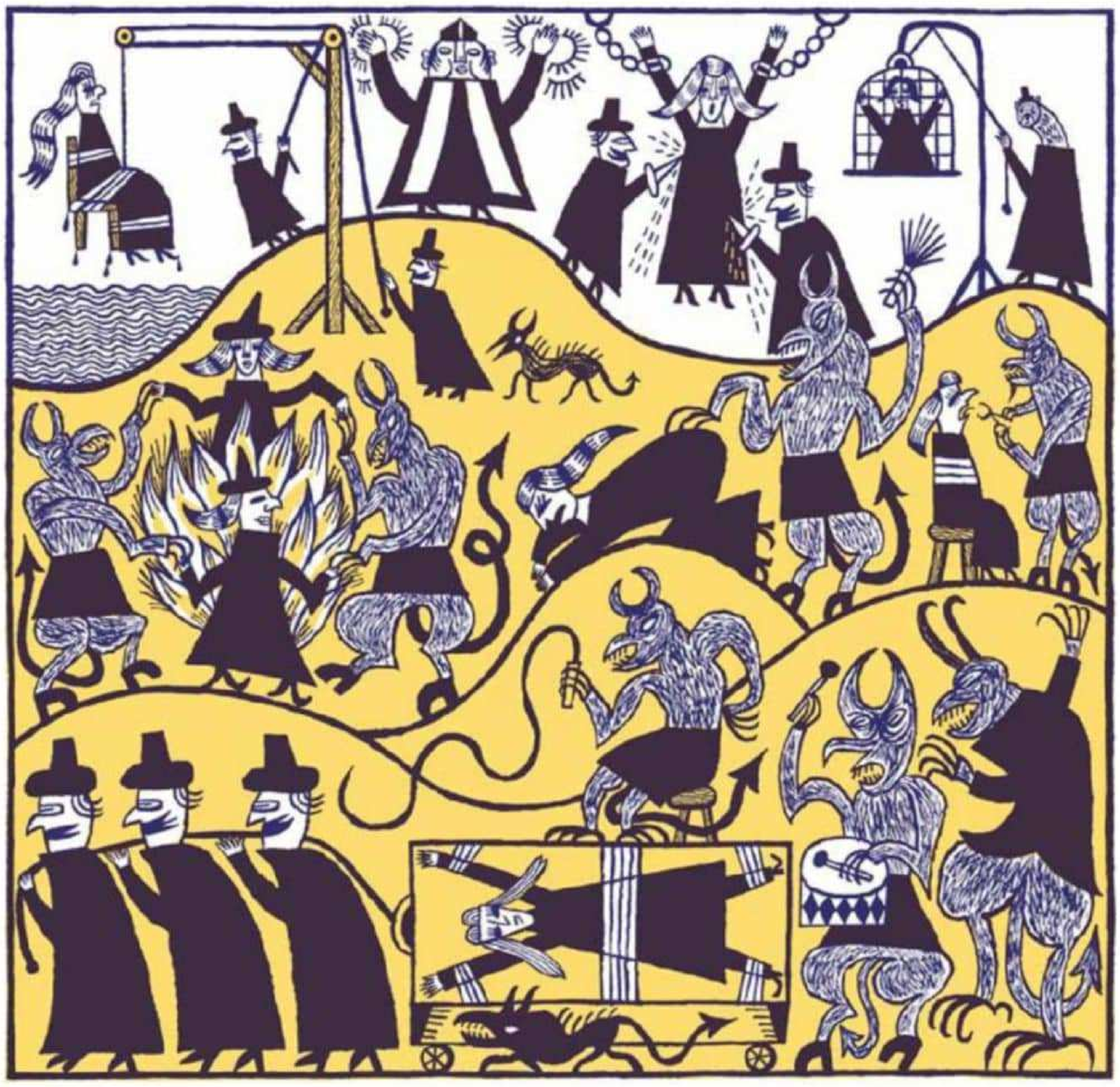
Whatever happens, the existential threats of A.I. will not be addressed by copyright law. What we're looking at right now is a struggle over money. Licensing agreements, copyright protections, employment contracts—it's all going to result in a fantastically complex regulatory regime in which the legal fiction of information "ownership" gives some parties a bigger piece of the action than other parties. Life in an A.I. world will be very good for lawyers. Unless, of course, they are replaced with machines. ♦

BOOKS

WITCHY WOMEN

The surprising persistence of the witch trial.

BY RIVKA GALCHEN



King James—of the Bible—thought that drowning was the best test of witchcraft.

In 1532, when the Constitutio Criminalis Carolina became the law of the Holy Roman Empire, it specified that witchcraft was a serious crime, punishable by execution by fire. The Carolina was often cited in the European witch trials that followed, with crazes peaking in the second half of the sixteenth century, and again in the early decades of the seventeenth century. In Germany alone, twenty-five thousand people were executed. The Carolina is sometimes called the basis for these witch hunts, but it can also be seen as an attempt to tame them. Previously, trials could proceed on the allegations of only one accuser; the new set of laws required two. The accusers had to be deemed credible, and they could not be paid or of evil repute. There also had to be sufficient indication of sorcery for the accused to be tortured.

The Carolina was an improvement over trial by ordeal, which for centuries had been a fairly standard practice. In one common example, a suspected witch was forced to hold a burning iron; how quickly God healed the wound was the measure by which the accused was declared innocent or guilty. In 1597, King James VI of Scotland (he later became King James I of England—and of the Bible) wrote "Daemonologie," in which he enthusiastically embraced witch-hunting. His ideas were not aligned with those behind the Carolina. He remained faithful to the floating ordeal—tossing suspects into the sea, where only the innocent, presumably, would sink. He described it as "perfect," because "water shall refuse to receive them in her bosom, that have shaken off them the sacred Water of Baptisme." Drowning was reserved for the saved. Compared with such ordeals, the Carolina begins to look progressive. It connects to the dream that the law, if written well, can save us from our worst selves, that it can temper passion with reason and reduce violence rather than codify it. Though things don't always work out that way.

Marion Gibson, a professor of Renaissance and magical literature at the University of Exeter, has now written eight books on the subject of witches, including "Witchcraft Myths in American Culture" and "Witchcraft: The Basics." Her eighth book, "Witchcraft: A History in Thirteen Trials" (Scribner), traverses seven centuries and several continents. There's the trial of a Sámi woman, Kari, in seventeenth-century Finnmark; of a young religious zealot named Marie-Catherine Cadière, in eighteenth-century France; and of a twentieth-century politician, Bereng Lerotholi, in Basutoland, in present-day Lesotho. The experiences of the accused women (and a few accused men) are foregrounded, through novelistic descriptions of their lives before and after their persecution. Gibson describes, for example, Joan Wright working in the "cold hush" of her employer's dairy, churning milk so that "fat globules rupture and coalesce" in the "near-magical transformation of cream into butter." The inevitable charisma of villainy makes the accusers vivid as well. The character that I found myself following most attentively, however, is also the book's through line: the trial.

"The Return of Martin Guerre," by Natalie Zemon Davis, is built around the historical trial of Arnaud du Tilh, who for years successfully pretended to be the peasant Martin Guerre. "The peasants, more than ninety percent of whom could not write in the sixteenth century, have left us few documents of self-revelation," Davis writes. "But there exists another set of sources in which peasants are found in many predicaments"—it is in court cases that we can catch sight of the hopes and emotions and fears of those who leave no other written record. The trials of the accused

ILLUSTRATION BY KATHARINA KULENKAMPFF

people in "Witchcraft" return to us, in detail, lives about which we might otherwise know nothing.

In what ways have varying legal codes and trial procedures altered the destinies of those accused of witchcraft? Although thirteen trials can't decide the question, the book does put it on the stand. Gibson shows us church courts, state courts, colonial courts, assize courts, and improvised court systems used in the chaos of a civil war, and there are judging panels of three and judging panels of twenty-five. (And historically there were no judges or jurors who were women.) There are also the kinds of trial that happen outside a courtroom: trials by poison, and King James's favored trial by "swim." To wager on the outcome of these various trials is not as easy as you might think. They always seem to be hurrying to doom, but they occasionally don't get there.

In 1645, in Manningtree, England, a tailor goes to a diviner, because his wife is having violent fits that are, he says, "more than merely natural." The diviner confirms the man's fears: two women have bewitched his wife. This is how Bess Clarke, a one-legged unmarried woman, came to be arrested and tried. Clarke's mother had also been tried as a witch, years earlier, and executed. At the time of Clarke's trial, the English Civil War had left the court system in disarray. Rather than being tried in an assize court, whose judges tended not to be very religious, Clarke was tried by a presiding judge who was a strict Puritan, a slave-trafficker, and a notoriously cruel admiral. Clarke faced a procedure called "watching and walking": she was made to walk continuously around in her cell for four days, while observers noted whether any of her animal "familiars" or other devilish alliances come by to consult with her.

After Clarke became exhausted, she told her watchers that, if they would sit down with her, she would introduce them to her spirit animals. The watchers reported seeing several familiars, including a short-legged and plump "imp like unto a dog" that was white with sandy spots. One watcher said that this dog was the first spirit animal to appear, while another said that the first was a white cat named Hoult. There was also a long-legged greyhound named Vinegar Tom, a black rabbit called Sacke and Sugar, and a polecat. The animals were seen vanishing and transforming, and Clarke, in supplying her persecutors with the story of her seduction by Satan, said that they had been born from a fall into sin. Clarke is said to have referred to all the spirit animals as her "children"—and she did have a child at home, Jane, whom she had had baptized, and whose father had not married her.

In the ensuing trial, Clarke was not allowed representation, and her accusers were not cross-examined. The jury delivered a guilty verdict within minutes. She was sent to the gallows. Another convicted woman died while waiting in line to be hanged, perhaps from a heart attack. This did not stop the proceedings, and Clarke was killed that day.

What kinds of crime did people need to ascribe to witches? The Carolina punished only crimes that had caused others damage, but many women were charged with less tangible evils, such as attending a witches' Sabbath or changing form. Some witches were said to have cursed brides, some to have caused storms to sink ships, some to have sailed to sea in a sieve, and quite a few to have effected the death of a baby. In a 1591 treatise, Johann Georg Gödelmann, a legal scholar who favored the regulations of the Carolina—and thus can be seen as relatively progressive for a witch expert of that time—argued that controlling the weather was not a real phenomenon, and therefore could not be the basis for legal questioning. He worked to separate people who had delusions—but were not actually witches—from what he saw as a quite small number of people who really did perpetrate evil, who really had made pacts with the Devil.

Torture produced wild tales of evil, of course. But even the monstrous and incredible forced confessions were often still personal; the accused sometimes told of what had really happened to them, indirectly. Kari, the Sámi woman, who was tried in Finnmark in a Danish colonial court, described the Devil taking the form not of a local animal, such as a reindeer, but of a goat, a non-native animal associated with the colonizer. When Bess Clarke confessed to having sex with the Devil, her description of him was reminiscent of the man who had impregnated her. Tatabe, an enslaved woman in Salem, Massachusetts (depicted in "The Crucible," by Arthur Miller), was accused of bewitching two young girls. When pressed under torture to name her collaborators, she described one as "a tall man of Boston" in fancy clothes. She also said the other witches told her that, if she didn't do what they said, they would hurt her, or even that her head would be cut off. Tatabe had most likely been sold into slavery as a child and sent to a plantation before spending a decade in Boston—she populated her confession with descriptions of people and situations we assume she encountered in her real life.

One can also glimpse the fears of the persecutors in the confessions they forced out of the accused. Consider the witchery accusations made by King James. His mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, was said to have been involved in the murder of her second husband, James's father. Later, James's foster father was poisoned, then his successor was executed, and then the next successor was accused of seducing the young King, when he was a teen-ager. In 1587, Mary was executed, and in 1590 James instigated a witch trial against a healer named Agnes Sampson, accusing her of trying to murder him and his Danish bride by causing storms to sink their ships. In James's mind, the evil forces in the world were set on his murder. Eventually, Sampson confessed to collaborating with witches from Copenhagen, attending a series of meetings planning his destruction, being present on his wedding night, and having attended a witches' Sabbath in which she and a circle of witches passed around a waxen figure of him, which they then gave to Satan. It's as if James and Sampson became a storytelling duo conceived in Hell.

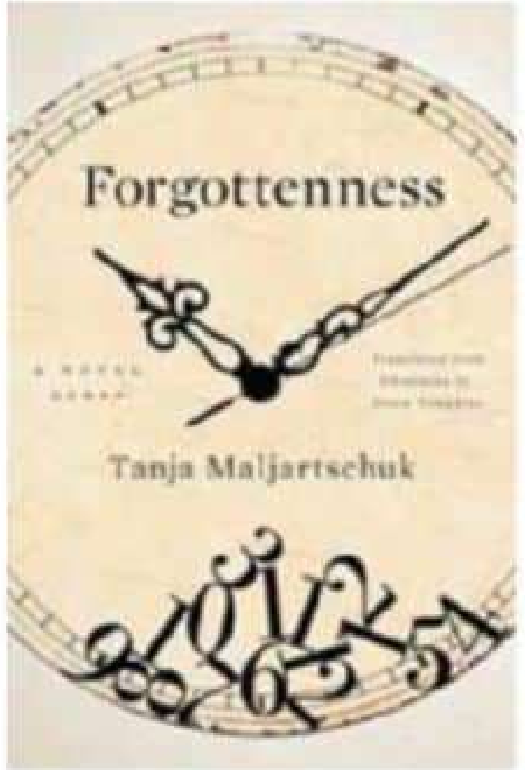
In one witch trial under James, the jury acquitted the accused, so James put the jury members on trial, until they agreed to change their ruling. Other courts were less kangaroo. Gibson illustrates one in the opening chapter. The setting is Innsbruck, Austria, in 1485, a time when the power balance between the Pope and the Archduke of Austria is stable but uneasy. An inquisitor named Heinrich Kramer arrives with paperwork from the Pope, allowing him to set up an inquisition to root out witches. He gives sermons decrying the murderous witches all around and exhorts the townspeople to be vigilant in reporting any witchy activity; he also keeps track of who attends his services. The local authorities aren't pleased to have Kramer there, but they can't dismiss him, not with his papal paperwork. One day, Helena Scheuberin, a confident and outspoken woman, passes Kramer on the street and says to him what lots of Innsbruckers were likely thinking: "You lousy monk! I hope you get the falling sickness!" Other accounts report that she said, "When will the devil take you away?" Kramer initiates an investigation of Scheuberin, who not only hasn't been attending his services but has also been heard to say that demonology is heresy.

Scheuberin has accumulated a few enemies over the years. She attended the wedding of a suitor she had rejected, and the man's wife says that she hasn't felt well since then. There's also the family of a knight she is said to have had an affair with; he died young, not long after the affair, and his relatives are suspicious. Kramer puts together a case against Scheuberin (and six other people). He declares himself the judge, but the local authorities intervene, and insist on the bishop's hearing the case. The accused are jailed, the wheels of injustice turn.

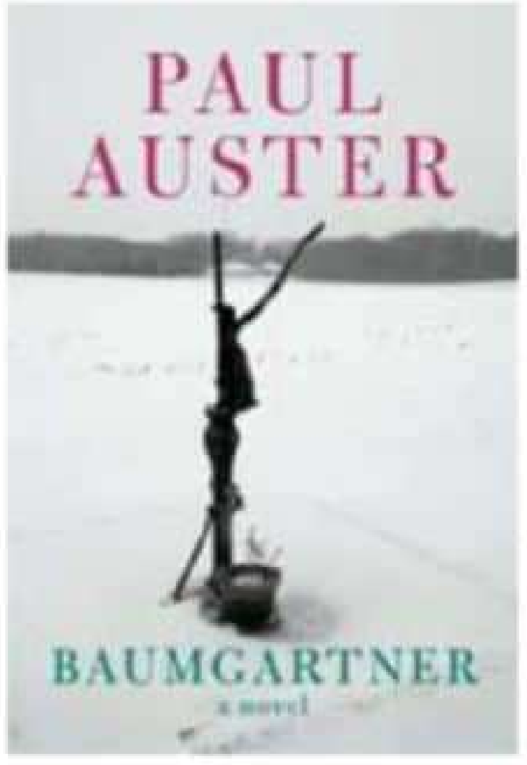
A big crowd attends the trial. In court, Scheuberin initially says that she won't swear on the Bible. (Some Catholics viewed the use of holy objects in that way to be heretical.) Kramer proceeds with his questioning. Soon the subject of inquiry turns away from witchcraft. "Are you of a good way of life?" he asks. Yes, she says. "Were you a virgin at the time of your marriage?" Scheuberin refuses to answer.

After what was likely a suspenseful silence, the bishop's representative intervenes. The sex lives of Innsbruckers are, he says, "secret matters that hardly concern the case." Kramer is out of step with the norms of the area. The mood has palpably changed. An expert lawyer from out of town, Johann Merwart of Wemding, announces that he will be representing the accused, all seven of

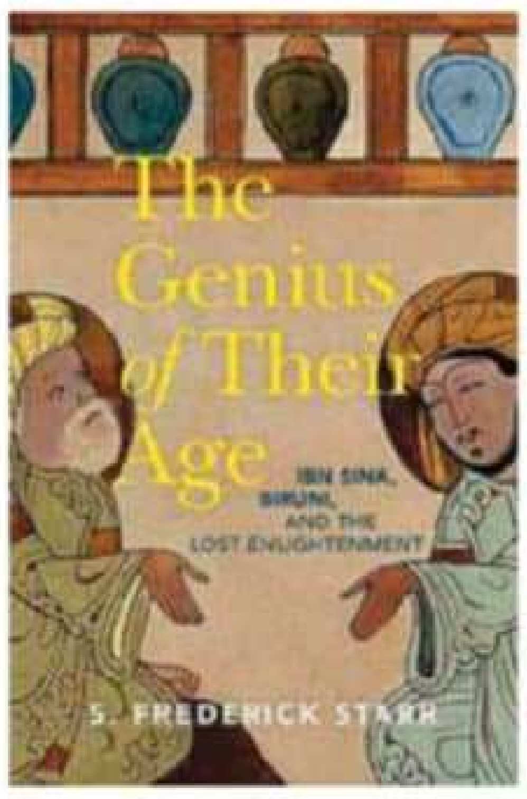
BRIEFLY NOTED



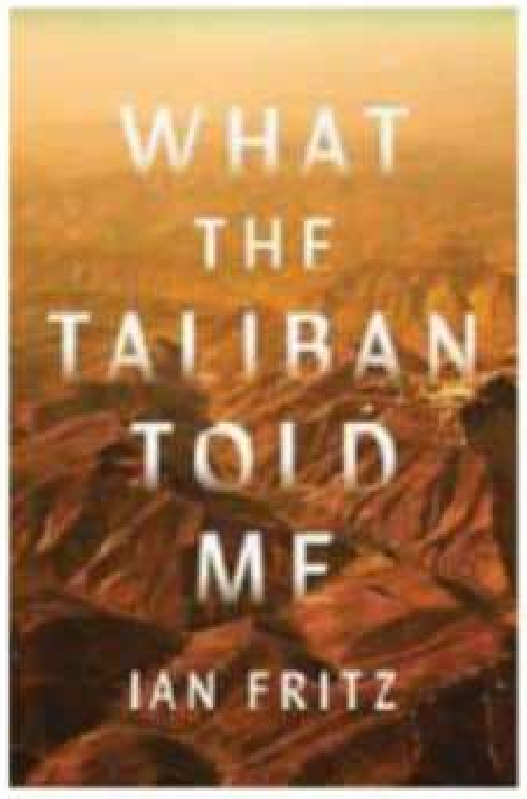
Forgottenness, *by Tanja Maljartschuk, translated from the Ukrainian by Zenia Tompkins (Liveright).* This thoughtful novel connects two characters separated by a century: a present-day Ukrainian writer and the twentieth-century Polish Ukrainian nationalist Viacheslav Lypynskyi. In one thread, Maljartschuk plumbs Lypynskyi's incendiary biography: born a Polish aristocrat, he served as a diplomat for the nascent Ukrainian state before living in exile when the Soviets took over. In another, the contemporary writer revisits her failed love affairs, and her grandparents' experiences in the famine of 1932-33. As Maljartschuk makes the characters' common history apparent, she compares it to a blue whale consuming plankton, "milling and chewing it into a homogenous mass, so that one life disappears without a trace, giving another, the next life, a chance."



Baumgartner, *by Paul Auster (Grove).* The center of this slender, ruminative novel is Sy Baumgartner, an author and a professor who, at seventy, has been mourning his wife's sudden death for nearly ten years. As Baumgartner struggles to make sense of this chapter of his life, he starts dating, and he devotes himself to a new book, "a serio-comic, quasi-fictional discourse on the self in relation to other selves." (Notably, Auster and his protagonist share several traits—both are from Newark and both married translators—and Baumgartner's mother's maiden name was Auster.) Auster writes movingly about seeming to recover after great loss: "If you are the one who lives on, you will discover that the amputated part of you, the phantom part of you, can still be a source of profound, unholy pain."



The Genius of Their Age, *by S. Frederick Starr (Oxford).* Ibn Sina and Biruni, two polymaths born in the late tenth century, were giants of the Islamic Golden Age, producing groundbreaking findings in mathematics, science, and philosophy. Both men were from what is now Uzbekistan, and both drew from Aristotle, but this engaging history uncovers their differences, in temperament and in scholarly approach. Ibn Sina was a bon vivant and an eager public intellectual who reasoned from abstract metaphysical principles, whereas Biruni, a recluse, "moved from the specific to the general." After a vitriolic exchange early in their careers, the two men apparently never corresponded again. As Starr brings them back into conversation, he illuminates the richness of thought that characterized this "lost Enlightenment."



What the Taliban Told Me, *by Ian Fritz (Simon & Schuster).* In this memoir, a former linguist for the U.S. military, who monitored suspected Taliban communications in Afghanistan, gathering information that determined the people American soldiers would kill, reflects on his deployment. The book's arc traces his moral transformation: Fritz recounts how listening to the prosaic conversations of potential enemy combatants rendered him unable to depersonalize them, and therefore unable to perform his job. Essentially, his war chronicle cautions that the urge to make monsters of others creates the risk of slipping into the monstrous ourselves.

them. Merwart challenges Kramer's paperwork, which is in disarray. (It's the sunny obverse side of a bureaucratic nightmare.) By the end of the day, the accused are released, and Kramer is under investigation.

The Witchcraft Act of 1735 was England's effort to put a halt to witch-hunting. It made it illegal to claim that there were people with magical powers, and illegal to accuse someone of being a witch—a thing that enough people in power had decided did not exist. Science was beginning to tell different stories about the world. There were fewer kings and more parliaments, and the influence of the Church was diminishing. (There was one holdout among high-ranking officials to the Witchcraft Act—James Erskine, who is also notable for having arranged for his wife to be abducted and brought to a distant island so that she could be pronounced dead; Erskine held a big public funeral for her.) The act precipitated a shift from prosecuting people as witches to prosecuting people who presented themselves as witches, or as magical in some way. Often enough, this meant putting the same sorts of people—women making money as healers or diviners, or colonized people whose local belief systems were frightening to the colonizers—on trial.

Gibson tells the story of Nellie Duncan, a woman born into a puritanical family in Scotland in 1897, who later became a Spiritualist: she shared news of the dead, coughed up ectoplasm (typically muslin), and ventriloquized, so that cabinets appeared to contain speaking mediums. In the years after the First World War, demand for such services was high. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle regularly consulted with a spirit named Pheneas, via his second wife, Jean Leckie, who was also a Spiritualist.

Unlike Leckie, Duncan was, by the age of sixteen, an unwed mother. She was kicked out of her family home and worked in a factory before marrying a cabinetmaker and having seven more children. Duncan had lung and kidney infections, and her husband had a heart attack and a nervous breakdown, so she went back to work, this time at a bleaching plant, with shifts that ran from 5 A.M. to 2 P.M.; when she got home, she did mending and laundry work, to make additional money. But then Duncan's religious upbringing came to help her in an unexpected way.

Even as a child, she had seen ghosts and had prophetic dreams. As an adult, she realized that she could channel spirit energies, absorb the illnesses of others, and predict deaths, even distant ones. Her beliefs weren't all that eccentric. Gibson cites a survey indicating that "thirty five percent of British people thought such contact" with the dead was possible. Duncan joined a Spiritualist church, travelled to Edinburgh and London, and eventually began to make a pretty good living. Her séances weren't cheap. She could channel spirits in Welsh, German, Gaelic, French, and even Llanito, a vernacular language from Gibraltar. Sure, she made an error here and there, about people's sons in the army, and whether and how they had died. But she had also foreseen—or at least known about before it was announced to the public—the 1941 sinking of a British military ship.

In 1944, under the Witchcraft Act, she was charged with pretending to conjure the spirits of dead people. A Spiritualist society provided her with an attorney, whose strategy was an odd one. He called his client "a big fat woman" and a "nobody," and he said that he considered all his clients to be "unimportant people" who were illustrations of what was important: that Spiritualism was true. The defense failed. Duncan was sentenced to nine months in prison. But supporters of Spiritualism, and of Duncan, called her "the last witch," to emphasize what they saw as a miscarriage of justice. Winston Churchill described the decision to prosecute Duncan as "obsolete tomfoolery." By 1951, the Witchcraft Act had been repealed and replaced with laws persecuting deliberately fraudulent mediums, sparing true believers. (This law itself was repealed, in 2008.)

Gibson uses Duncan's story to illustrate shifts in how the idea of witches, and of witch-hunting—and, more rarely, a belief in actual witches—persists in more recent times. She writes, "By the late nineteenth century the supposed enemies might be spiritualists, anarchists, communists, suffragists, or homosexual people; in the twentieth century, civil rights campaigners and anti-colonial nationalists joined the list."

If Gibson is perhaps at times fitting witches to her own vision, she is not alone in that. She tells a compelling story about "La Sorcière," a now mostly discredited study of witch trials by the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet, who sometimes collaborated with his wife, Athénaïs. In Gibson's eyes, "La Sorcière" argues that French witches of the past were "revolutionary pagan priestesses, healers, and mesmerists, sexually liberated, and in touch with an old deity wrongly demonized as satanic." The Michelets identified as pantheists; they made the "witches" of the past into their own likeness. Seeing witches through the Michelets' lens is comforting, even moving, but it also feels not only incorrect but wrong. There are ways of valuing these accused witches without asserting that they were heroes and rebels who embodied our beliefs.

Perhaps our fascination with witch trials is more about imagining our own trials. "Somebody must have made a false accusation against Josef K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong," begins one of literature's most famous stories about a trial. In Kafka's novel, Josef K.'s experience is nightmarish. But the courtroom is in the attic of his own residence. To my mind, there is an element of wish fulfillment in "The Trial," a dream of being heard, or watched, or of profound interest to . . . someone. Even a malevolent, irrational force will do.

In many an imagination, trials are about being heard, being exonerated. We see this in phrases such as "having your day in court." Many first-person novels read like pleas made to an imagined court, one of public or godly opinion. In the story within Kafka's "Trial" which is often excerpted as "Before the Law," a man spends year after year at the door of the law, which is guarded by a gatekeeper. The man is waiting to gain entrance. Near the end of his life, old and frail, the man asks the gatekeeper a question: Why haven't more people sought entrance at the door of the law? He's been the only one there, over all those years. The gatekeeper responds that it's because that door is for him alone, and now the gatekeeper can shut it. ♦

BOOKS

EXIT, VOICE, AND LOYALTY

A Libyan can't quit London in Hisham Matar's "My Friends."

BY JAMES WOOD

Khaled, Matar's narrator, has two friends who return to Libya. He prefers not to.

St. James's Square, like many others in London, appears with little forewarning or fanfare. You leave the expensive ruckus of Piccadilly, cut down a narrow side street, and there it suddenly is: a holiday from the city, with a public garden islanded in its center. One gentle corner is home to the London Library, founded in 1841 by the Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle, who complained that the British Museum Library was giving him "museum headache."

In the early nineteen-eighties, the square was also home to the Libyan Embassy, or the Libyan People's Bureau, as it had been renamed following Colonel Muammar Qaddafi's "popular revolution." On the morning of April 17, 1984, a crowd of anti-Qaddafi demonstrators gathered across the street from the Embassy. A smaller counter-demonstration of Qaddafi loyalists faced them outside the building. The atmosphere was freighted with the hostilities and mistrust of the preceding years: Qaddafi's regime had bombed and murdered Libyan exiles in London whom it considered its enemies; a day before the April 17th demonstration, two student activists were publicly hanged in Tripoli.

In St. James's Square, the demonstration had barely got going when shots were fired from the Embassy's windows. Eleven protesters were injured, and a policewoman named Yvonne Fletcher, on duty that morning with her policeman fiancé, was killed. I vividly remember the ensuing political turmoil. The square was evacuated and the Embassy besieged by armed police for eleven days, until Mrs. Thatcher's government allowed the remaining Libyan officials to leave the country. Britain and Libya broke off diplomatic relations, and a deep antagonism persisted until the end of the century. Yvonne Fletcher's name became talismanic in Britain; in the square, a small stone memorial marks the spot where she fell.

That incident sits at the emotional center of Hisham Matar's new novel, "My Friends" (Random House); all the spokes of Matar's lingering, melancholy story connect to this transforming event. "My Friends" is narrated by a Libyan exile named Khaled Abd al Hady, who left Benghazi in 1983 for Edinburgh University, and who has lived in London for thirty-two years. On the evening of November 18, 2016, Khaled decides to walk home from St. Pancras station, where he has seen off Hosam Zowa, an old friend who is heading for Paris. Khaled's circuitous walk, which loosely structures the narrative and concludes only when the novel does, leads him from St. Pancras to the Regent's Park Central Mosque, from there to Soho, from Soho to St. James's Square, and finally to Shepherd's Bush, where he has lived in the same small rented flat for the entirety of his London life. This evening, Khaled is drawn to return to St. James's Square because he was one of the demonstrators outside the Embassy back in 1984, alongside two Libyan men who would become his closest friends (they give the novel its title): one is Zowa, whom he has just left at St. Pancras, and the other is a fellow Edinburgh student named Mustafa al Touny. As he walks, Khaled reprises the history of their intense triangular friendship, the undulations of their lives, and the shape and weight of their exile.

Exile turns countries into temporalities: the place you came from and the place you find yourself in become the time before and the time after. Khaled's presence at the 1984 demonstration makes that division acute, sealing his emigration by making it impossible for him to return to Libya. On that April day, we learn, Khaled was shot and wounded in his right lung. Assigned a false name, he spent six weeks recovering in a London hospital, was

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN HICKEY

debriefed by Scotland Yard detectives, and was finally given political asylum in Britain. He was now a marked man. Exile entered his body as fatefully and decisively as the shooter's bullet. In a beautifully resonant image, Khaled tells us that he felt the pain in his chest like "a cold fog ballooning inside the lung," adding that he still feels a milder version of it when he fails to wrap up properly in chilly weather. He may or may not have wanted to become a permanent resident of London, but damp, foggy London has taken up permanent residence inside him.

Hisham Matar is a poet of before and after. He was born in 1970 in New York City, where his father, Jaballa Matar, was working for the Libyan delegation at the United Nations. The family returned to Tripoli in 1973, and then moved to Cairo at the end of the seventies. Jaballa, a former Libyan Army officer, became a proudly adamant opponent of Qaddafi's regime. He used his wealth and influence to fund sleeper cells inside Libya, and to organize armed resistance in neighboring Chad. In 1986, Hisham left Egypt for boarding school in England, where he, like the narrator of "My Friends," assumed a false identity for the sake of his safety. In 1990, while Hisham was a student in London, his father was abducted from the family apartment in Cairo and disappeared into the mouth of the Libyan security state. The family knows that Jaballa spent time in the feared Abu Salim prison, in Tripoli, also known as "the Last Stop"; in the mid-nineties, letters were smuggled out in which, with regal irony, he described the concrete box of his cell as a "noble palace," furnished "in the style of Louis XVI."

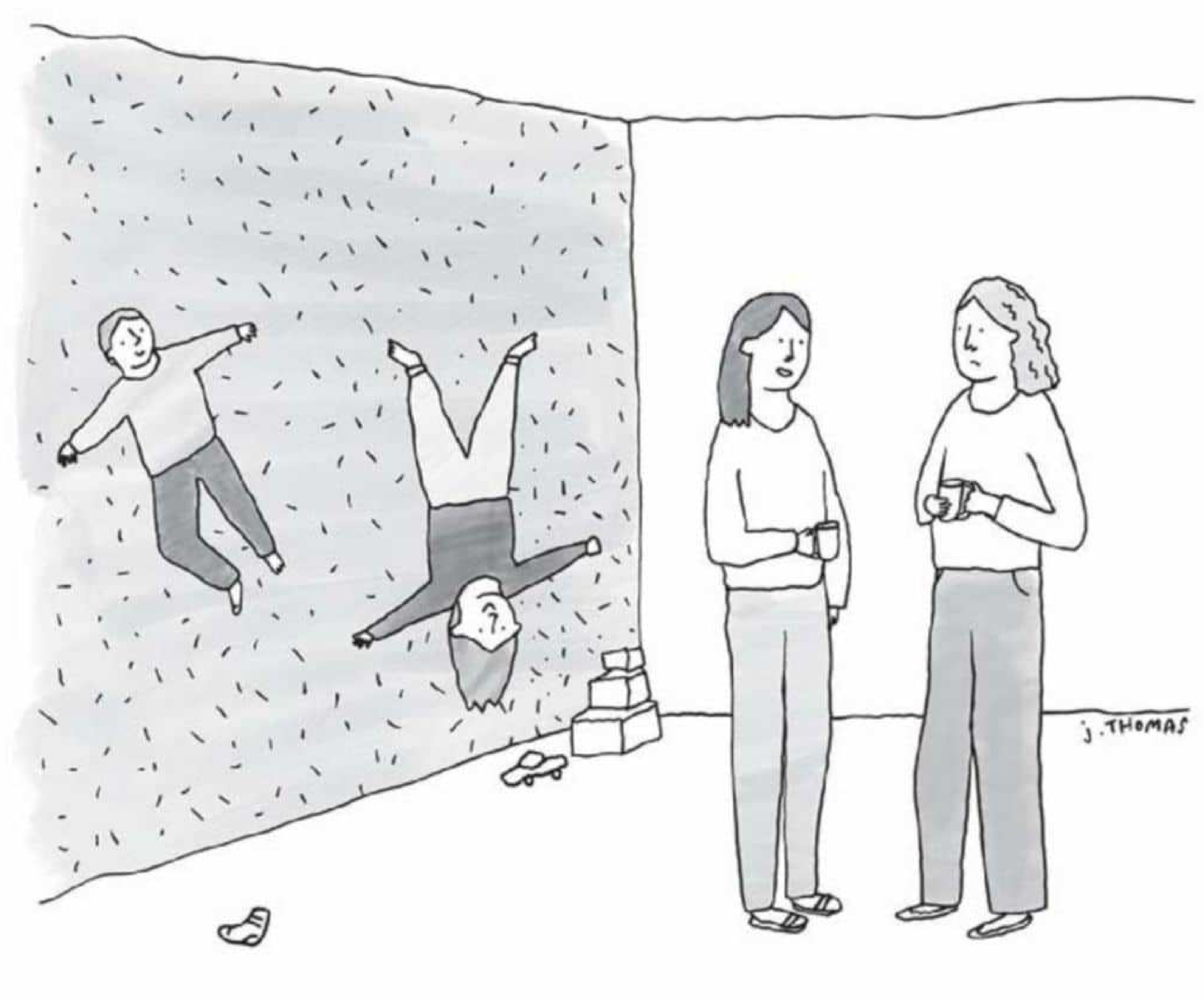
Then all communication ceased. One prisoner claimed to have seen him as late as 2002. In 2012, Hisham returned to Libya, in the hope of finding out what happened to his father, a quest that, agonizingly, also incorporated the more tenuous hope that Jaballa was still alive. But in a nonfiction account of that journey, "The Return" (2016), he concludes that his father most probably died on June 29, 1996, one of the victims of a purge in which twelve hundred and seventy prisoners were executed. Jaballa was fifty-seven; Hisham was twenty-five.

In two novels and a memoir—respectively, "In the Country of Men" (2006), "Anatomy of a Disappearance" (2011), and "The Return"—Matar has found different ways of narrating the aftermath of this most decisive wound. He has written that absence is not empty but "a busy place, vocal and insistent." His work speaks eloquently of this loud absence and its unstopped complexities. One of them is obvious enough: the momentous event of Matar's life happened first to his father and only secondarily to him. Matar's writing is painfully alive to this asymmetry. Jaballa was potent, glamorous, mysterious, endowed with a kind of Ciceronian fearlessness. "My forehead does not know how to bow," he wrote from prison.

"It was said that even the way he walked irritated the authorities," Matar recounts. "It exuded defiance." How could sitting in a study in London and writing about this man ever measure up to his profile in courage? It's one thing to live in the shadow of a daunting parent, a predicament many children know. It's a different dilemma to live in the *ghostly* shadow of that greatness, where the challenging patriarchal achievement is always beyond reach—legendary, lost. Matar writes, "There is shame in not knowing where your father is, shame in not being able to stop searching for him, and shame also in wanting to stop searching for him."

A character in "In the Country of Men" says that one of Qaddafi's victims "vanished like a grain of salt in water." But the bitterness of not knowing is a drink that must be swallowed again and again. When did Jaballa Matar die? Was he still alive in 2002? Or later? If he died in 1996, why is there no record of it? Not knowing condemns both the deceased and the descendant to wander, arms outstretched, searching ceaselessly for each other. Matar's work is filled with images of questing, of waiting, of restoration and recognition. "In the Country of Men" closes with the fatherless narrator, now twenty-six and living in Cairo, preparing to meet his mother, who is finally visiting him from Libya, and feeling "like a faithful dog still waiting, confident that his owner will come to reclaim him." Telemachus, Hamlet, Edgar haunt these books. In "The Return," Matar tells us that the picture of Gloucester being led by his son Edgar toward the Dover cliffs has lived in him since his father's disappearance—in particular, the lines "Give me your hand: you are now within a foot / Of the extreme verge." The son who saves the father may also be saved by the father.

The shape of Matar's lifelong quest inevitably places a narrative emphasis on the shock of his own abandonment: the father leaves home. But in another, quieter motif that runs through Matar's work, the decisive break is not when the father leaves but when the son does. In each of Matar's earlier novels, the narrator is sent away as a teen-ager from Libya to a school in a foreign country (Egypt in "In the Country of Men," England in "Anatomy of a Disappearance"). "The Return" recounts the comic-pathetic adventure of the young Hisham, arriving from Cairo at Heathrow Airport and taking a black London cab all the way to his boarding school in the countryside, because his parents had told him to. (The cabdriver gets lost, and grumpily ejects his young passenger in the middle of nowhere.) Matar's new novel makes our émigré a couple of years older, with Khaled leaving Libya for university rather than for boarding school. But he never returns to his homeland, even as he watches Mustafa and Hosam go back and eventually join the fight against Qaddafi in 2011. Thinking of those friends, Khaled talks of how "the Libyan wind that tossed us north returned to sweep its children home." But he is apparently not one of those children. He is "reluctant Khaled," the one whose life doesn't quite fit together, a man unable and then unwilling to go home even when he could; unwilling to risk unravelling the sparse, careful existence that he has built for himself in London. "The line that now separates me from my former self is the chasm that I remain unable to bridge," he reflects. "You cannot be two people at once."



"Gentle parenting wasn't working, so we're trying Velcro parenting."

So who is leaving whom? For the first time in Matar's work, there is no absent father. Khaled's parents remain alive and well in Benghazi, and indeed manage to visit their son in London in 1992, when he is twenty-six. But he does not visit them. It's as if Khaled is both Telemachus and Odysseus, at once son and father, abandoned and abandoning. Khaled made the mistake of leaving home when "no one should ever leave their home," and the price he pays for this sin will be a kind of long imprisonment in England. The mysteriousness of Khaled's inertia, his woundedness—both a literal wound and a figurative one—turns Matar's narrative into a deep and detailed exploration not so much of abandonment as of self-abandonment. Who is this man? Khaled remains obscure in his inertia and his hesitation—damaged, adrift, cut loose. Exile has split him into different versions of himself, and he cannot quite tell the story that would make the parts cohere again.

Meanwhile, a gap opens up between him and Mustafa, who has always been the less literary of the two, and the more politically radical. Mustafa, Matar writes in a lovely phrase, "entered books with pointed implements," scanning texts for quick political agreement or disappointment; Khaled tends to brood and drift. Later, in Paris, when Khaled is in his late twenties, he meets Hosam Zowa, six years his senior. Hosam was once a famous young writer, the celebrated (and persecuted) author of a book of short stories, but he has produced nothing since. Khaled will discover that Hosam was also present at the St. James's Square demonstration. In time, both Mustafa and Hosam will be radicalized into heading home by the dream of removing Qaddafi—"the kernel of our grief," "our maddened father"—and building a new Libyan society. They implore Khaled to join them—the country needs him. Again, he holds back. The place he longs to return to is the place that fills him with the greatest fear. "The place and I have changed and what I have built here might be feeble and meek, but it took everything I had," he reflects.

Earlier in "My Friends," Khaled and Mustafa go to hear V. S. Naipaul speak in London. They are admirers of his great early novel "A House for Mr. Biswas" (1961), and are severely disappointed when Naipaul spends his time attacking "the evils of Muslims." Matar's fine novel, in turn, puts me in mind not of Naipaul's joyful "Biswas" but of his more melancholy later work, in particular two books he wrote about exile and emigration in England, the novel "The Enigma of Arrival" (1987) and the novella "Half a Life" (2001). It is, precisely, half a life that Khaled is living, a severed existence. Through Khaled's oddly paralyzed exile, Matar offers a beautifully panoptic portrait of London as the city of literary exile and emigration par excellence, a place where the Arab intelligentsia came in the seventies and eighties and after. "It cannot be said that they prospered here," Khaled muses. "If anything, they withered, grew old and tired. London was, in a way, where Arab writers came to die." (The reader enjoys the irony, since London is where Matar has, literarily, at least, thrived.) As Khaled reads further into English literature, he comes to understand that London is thronged with the ghosts of restless writers who didn't really belong there—Jean Rhys, T. S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence. "Where an exile chooses to live," Khaled tells the reader, with his peculiar fatalism, "is inevitably arbitrary."

In a novel rich in literary references, there is one name that is easy to miss, partly because it appears fleetingly, and partly because it has no obvious connection to the literatures of emigration or post-colonial exile. It's the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev, dear to both Matar and to his creation Khaled. Turgenev is the writer most directly associated with the figure that became known in nineteenth-century Russia as "the superfluous man"—the citizen unable to squeeze his soul into action, paralyzed by literature, marooned by excessive feeling, drifting slightly out of time. Khaled, "reluctant Khaled," the friend described by Mustafa as "the man who believes that if only people would read more the world would be a better place," the Libyan fearful of abandoning his "meek" existence in London, the intellectual who watches while his friends proudly depose the "maddened father," "the kernel of our grief"—indeed, the Colonel of their grief—is just such a superfluous man, and Matar's most touching and provoking creation: out of time, but of our time. ♦

ON TELEVISION

GHOST TOWN

The return of "True Detective," on HBO.

BY INKOO KANG

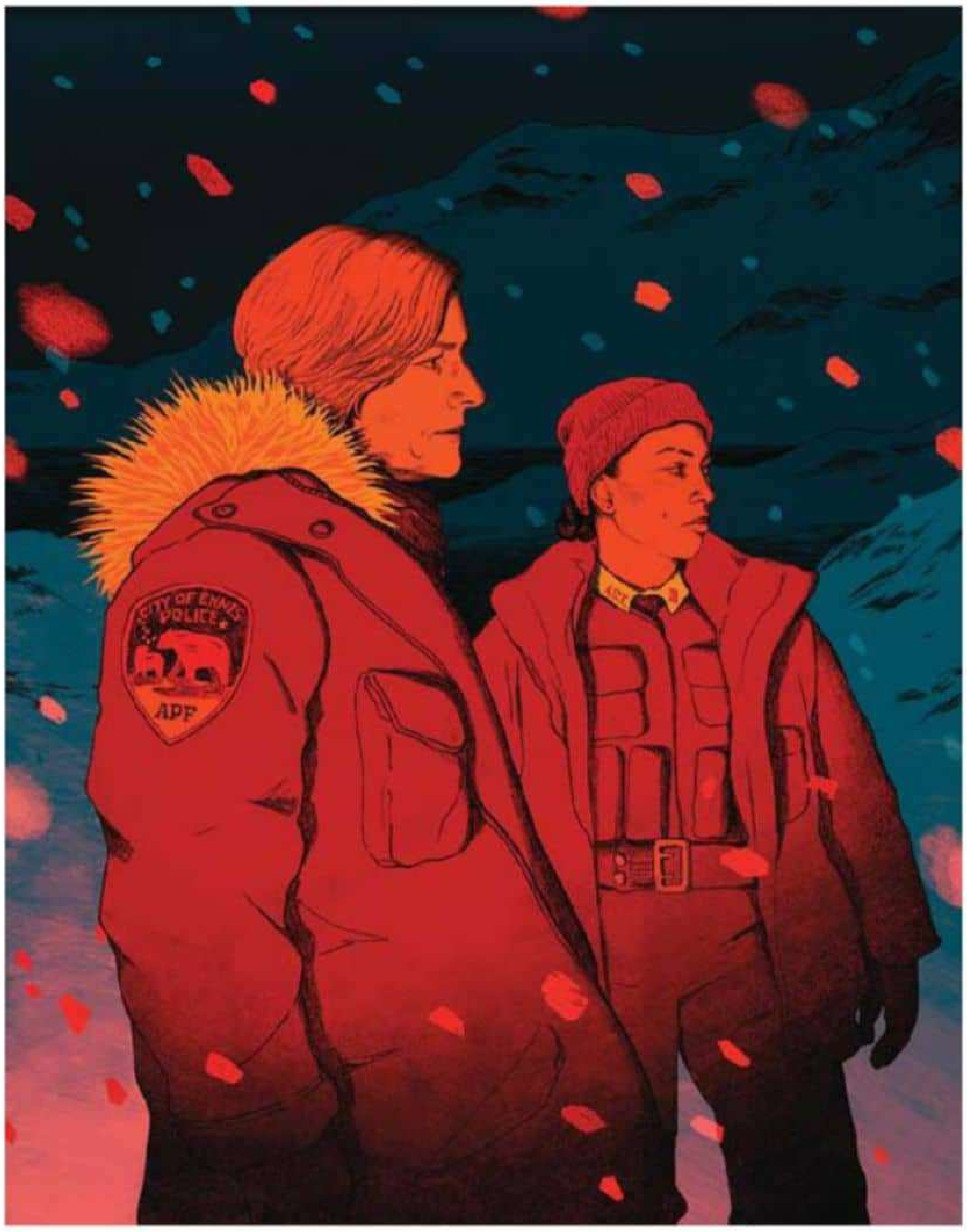


ILLUSTRATION BY ANGELICA ALZONA

The first crime scene in the new season of "True Detective" isn't that of the seven gnarled, naked bodies we see piled on top of one another in the snow at the end of Episode 1, but of a more mundane violence. A woman tries to flee her physically abusive boyfriend, and he tracks her down at work. This time, *he* gets walloped, with a metal bucket, by his girlfriend's co-worker, an older woman. The blow leaves his face a gory mess. The officer who arrives to escort the man off the premises, Evangeline Navarro (Kali Reis), asks the girlfriend whether she'll press charges against her ex; the trooper doesn't offer him the same choice before putting him in cuffs. The local chief of police, Liz Danvers (Jodie Foster), isn't exactly complimentary when she later says that Navarro's "got this thing about women who get hurt." The arrest feels righteous, but the stench of the man's menace lingers. Tidy endings are hard to come by, especially once blood has been spilled.

There's a refusal to separate or elevate sensational brutality from the everyday sort in this latest installment of the HBO anthology drama—a feminist revision of a series best known for its macho poetry and its ogling eye. The show's creator, Nic Pizzolatto, had his mostly male investigators contend with child murderers and pedophile rings; the QAnon-esque luridness of those crimes haunted the grizzled detectives for decades thereafter. The writer-director Issa López, who has taken over from Pizzolatto as showrunner, moves the action from sunbaked states to the fictional town of Ennis, Alaska, where, as of mid-December, daylight won't return for several weeks. The uninterrupted Arctic dark lends the season its subtitle, "Night Country," as well as its wintry, edge-of-civilization atmospherics. Watching the six-part season from under a blanket in California, I couldn't get warm.

"Night Country" takes pleasure in the complexities of its women protagonists.

The dead men who form the chilly, Boschian tableau at the pilot's conclusion are (or were) scientists at a research station on the outskirts of Ennis. With unknown funders and an improbable mission, the facility was shrouded in mystery even before its occupants turned up on the ice with their faces literally frozen in horror. But Navarro is hopeful that their bizarre fate will offer some clues in a homicide case that she and Danvers worked on years earlier—the unsolved murder of a Native woman named Annie Kowtok (Nivi Pedersen), who agitated against the mine that the town relies on for most of its jobs—when Annie's severed tongue materializes, without explanation, in the scientists' mess hall.

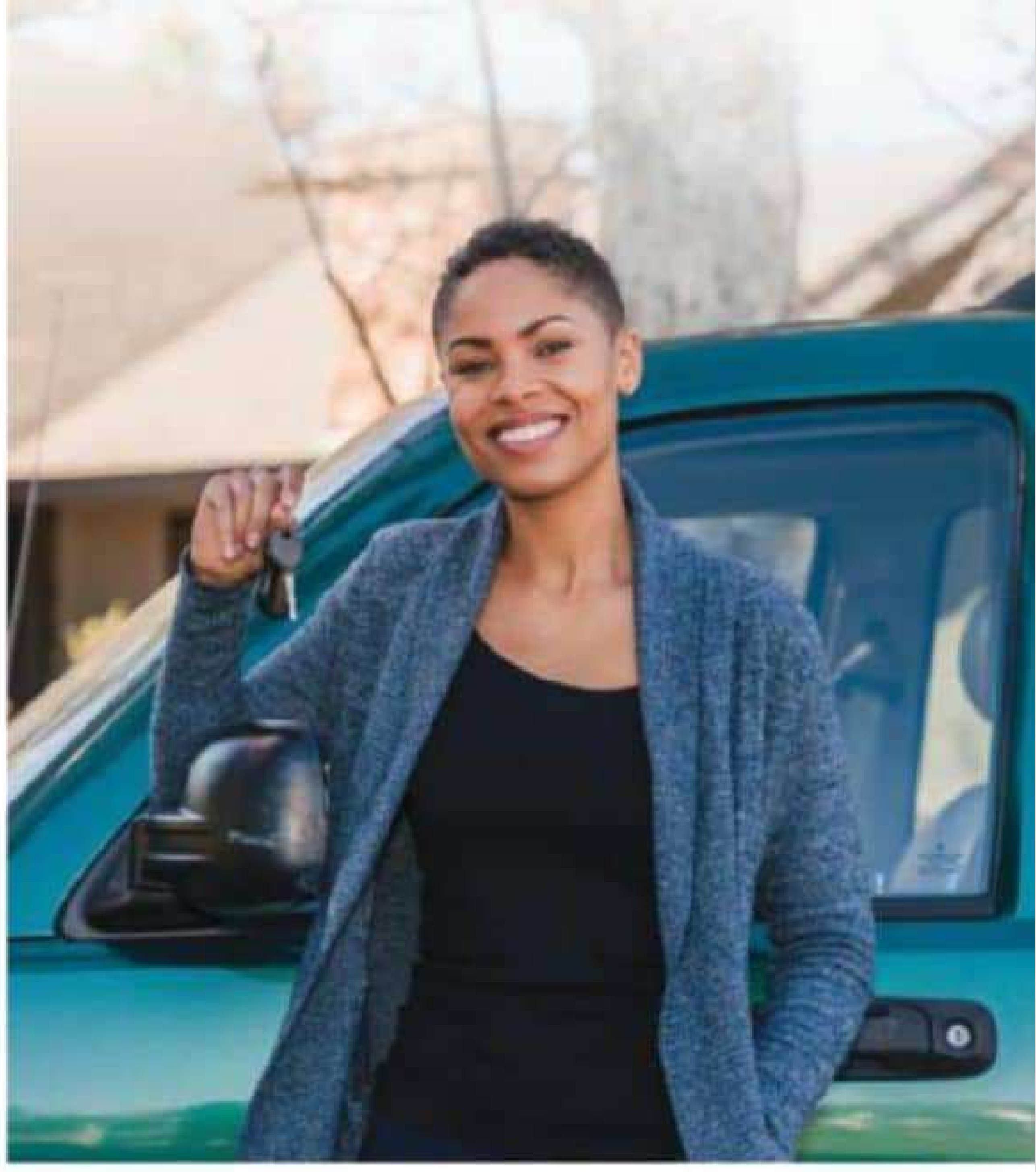
Here, the "True Detective" formula kicks in: Danvers and Navarro reunite as partners despite their mutual suspicion, and their rocky history eventually threatens their credibility on the new case. Conspiracies, hostile forces, and occult flourishes abound. The universe of the show is one in which the police—even the brilliant ones—are always failing. Danvers has long since reconciled herself to that reality: of the earlier cold case, she says, "This one was never gonna be solved. Ennis killed Annie." She's an outsider, unmoved by Navarro's insistence that a white murder victim wouldn't have been so readily forgotten. Nor is she particularly sensitive toward her stepdaughter, Leah (Isabella Star LaBlanc), whose newfound embrace of political activism—and of her Native heritage—she considers a needlessly risky attempt at teen-age rebellion. In Danvers's view, there's no ridding the world, or even her own squad, of shit-heels and malefactors; there's only limiting the damage.

Whereas Pizzolatto's iteration of the show had few female characters of substance, the new season delights in the complexities of its women protagonists. The chief's no-nonsense veneer allows her to insult her subordinates, including her shiftless deputy Hank (John Hawkes), without it feeling all that personal. But she's got a maternal side—one that she indulges with Hank's son, Peter (Finn Bennett), a junior officer—as well as a penchant for affairs with married men that's made her persona non grata among many women in town.

Foster has spent much of the past decade and a half behind the camera, as a director, but she's lost none of the cerebral confidence that has underpinned her distinctive sex appeal. It's no shock that she's compulsively watchable. It *is* a pleasant surprise that her nearly unknown co-star is just as compelling, with a refreshingly naturalistic screen presence. Reis, a professional boxer turned actor with cheek piercings where her dimples might be, looks so solid from the neck down that her body is like one long, taut muscle, but her character has a habit of picking fights she's unlikely to win. Navarro's volatility masks deep-seated vulnerabilities. Her unstable mother died before sharing Navarro's Inupiaq name with her, leaving her painfully disconnected from her culture. She lives in fear that her sister, Julia (Aka Niviâna), who's already been institutionalized once, may slip through the cracks if she continues to resist treatment—and that Julia isn't the only member of the family who inherited their mother's hallucinations. Not everyone finds the apparitions the siblings struggle to shake off so unnatural. "Ennis is where the fabric of all things is coming apart at the seams," Navarro's friend Rose (Fiona Shaw) says; she routinely sees her deceased lover roaming the tundra. "This is Ennis, man," another character says simply. "You see people who are gone sometimes. It's a long fucking night. Even the dead get bored."

In the prestige-TV era, the police procedural has grasped for cachet through social critique ("The Wire") or cool vibes ("Fargo"). Some achieve both—"Top of the Lake" is an easy example—but, in less adept hands, the former can feel like homework and the latter a shallow exercise in style. (In the most recent season of "Fargo," self-serious kitsch and punishing sincerity layered irritation on irritation.) Pizzolatto's "True Detective," which last aired five years ago, ran largely on vibes, too, and when sleaze and nihilism couldn't sustain its overcomplicated plotting, the mysteries sagged.

López has accomplished the uncommon feat of resuscitating a franchise that didn't deserve saving. She first broke out with "Tigers Are Not Afraid," a 2017 film that blended human horrors and magical realism, and her season of "True Detective" pulls off the same balancing act. Although Danvers, like the show's original protagonist (played by Matthew McConaughey), obsesses over "asking the right questions," López isn't always interested in furnishing answers, and the series mostly benefits from her willingness to dwell in ambiguity. Are Julia's visions a by-product of schizophrenia, as her doctors suggest, or rooted in spiritual truth? The matter is never fully litigated. López's dialogue is more pedestrian than her predecessor's, but she has an instinct for imagery that's both genuinely frightening and strangely inviting, amplifying the scripts' thematic heft. "Night Country" plays with the gendered expectations behind certain TV-cop tropes: it's Danvers, not Hank, who models self-destructive workaholism for Peter, downing vodka alone and poring over case files before pulling him away from his family on Christmas Eve. The season is similarly probing about the moral authority that can be reflexively assigned to women over men in our fantasies of female vengeance for male aggression. Through it all, meditations on the unknowability of the cosmos are offset by close observations of relationships—however contingent or dysfunctional they may be. By grounding her supernatural whodunnit in more intimate, interpersonal dramas, López transforms "True Detective" from a lot of mystical mumbling into a show with something to say. ♦



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THE THEATRE

IMPASSE

"Prayer for the French Republic" comes to Broadway.

BY HELEN SHAW

A French Jewish family contemplate safety and belonging, then and now.

In 1791, France became the first European country to fully emancipate its Jewish population, and for more than two hundred years French rabbis have spoken a special Sabbath benediction. "May France enjoy a lasting peace and preserve her glorious rank among the nations," they recite; the congregation replies, "Amen." For centuries, Jewish identity in France—despite the Dreyfus case, despite Vichy collaboration, despite waves of hate crime—has been tightly linked to the state. But in Joshua Harmon's "Prayer for the French Republic," now on Broadway at the Manhattan Theatre Club's Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, that contract shows signs of strain.

It's 2016 in Paris, and the Benhamou family is wondering if they should leave an increasingly hostile France. Since the twenty-six-year-old son, Daniel (Aria Shahghasemi), has begun wearing a yarmulke, he has been attacked twice, and the Benhamous ask if they—like eight thousand French Jews the previous year—should immigrate to Israel. Daniel's father, Charles (Nael Nacer), whose family fled antisemitism in Algeria in the sixties, says leave; his mother, Marcelle (Betsy Aidem), whose great-grandparents the Salomons miraculously survived the Nazi occupation of Paris, says remain. Daniel's brittle twenty-eight-year-old sister, Elodie (Francis Benhamou), takes no position—or, rather, she takes many positions, all of which counter the blundering political forays of their visiting American cousin, Molly (Molly Ranson). "I had no *idea* Israel's occupation of Palestine was so problematic. Thank you so much for that," Elodie says, her voice dripping acid.

Harmon's other major plays have been sour-sweet domestic comedies: "Significant Other" joked about loneliness within friend groups; "Bad Jews" got its many laughs from intrafamilial hostility. "Prayer," which was first produced Off Broadway, in 2022, incorporates that wry perspective on kinship into a political drama, in the sense that Harmon considers the polis, or the city-state. Is that city Paris, as it seems to be? Sensorily, perhaps. Harmon's stand-in, Molly, is bewitched, as American visitors always are, by the croissants; she soon starts dating her (distant) cousin Daniel, as a self-conscious adventure. ("I had a French boyfriend, in France, in Paris. Do you know how sexy that is where I come from?") And the production, directed by David Cromer, pauses several times to marvel at the eau-de-vie light streaming in through the set's tall windows.

But Harmon is also meditating on cities closer to hand. He has spoken about writing the play in the shadow of Trump's election, after the chants in Charlottesville, after the shooting at a kosher grocery store in Jersey City. His and Cromer's production fits into a modern Broadway where we are frequently asked to think about Jewish identity and antisemitism (in "Leopoldstadt," in "Harmony," in "Parade"), and about a United States that is boiling over with fascist rhetoric. The danger with political theatre, of course, is that our polis shifts so quickly. Scenes that are topical one season can take on unexpected valences the next.

Harmon uses two dramatic devices to shape our understanding of the Benhamous' debate: a present-day narrator—Marcelle's brother, Patrick (Anthony Edwards, replacing the Off Broadway version's excellent Richard Topol)—who addresses us directly; and flashbacks, in this case to the Salomons' Paris apartment, between 1944 and 1946. Takeshi Kata's ungainly set design allows one side of the airy Benhamou flat to rotate out of sight, showing us a sepia-dark dining room, where Irma Salomon (Nancy Robinette) and her husband, Adolphe (Daniel Oreskes), wait. There, after the liberation

ILLUSTRATION BY TOM HAUGOMAT

of the camps, they greet their returning son, Lucien (Ari Brand), and their fifteen-year-old grandson, Pierre, who will grow up to be Marcelle and Patrick's father. (Ethan Haberfield plays Pierre at fifteen; Richard Masur plays Pierre in his eighties.) Even after the horrors they've suffered, the Salomons, like the Benhamous after them, engage in spirited verbal duels. At first, the chilly, assimilationist Patrick seems to be the play's raisonneur, there to explicate history and to make sense of so much noisy disagreement; eventually, though, we see the contempt that Harmon has for Patrick's detachment.

"Prayer" is about argumentation—familial arguments, certainly, but also a tradition of disputation. And the show, when it hits its stride, captures both the galvanizing and the infuriating aspects of incessant intellectual combat. You can tell when a playwright has a favorite character in his own play, and here it's the fractious, sarcastic Elodie, who never stops debating. She's constantly telling people, "This is my last, last, final point," though Elodie never runs out of points. At a bar with Molly, discussing Israel with her cousin the way a steamroller might discuss bumps with asphalt, Elodie insists, "History *demands* we go back and forth all night, you can't understand one thing without understanding everything."

In order to short-circuit this perpetual back-and-forth—the play is already three hours long—Harmon must maneuver his characters toward some resolution. He does this by cranking up the emotion. At the end of Act I, for instance, the Benhamous are fighting about the possible move: Marcelle makes a solid case (they can't abandon their careers and her father); the younger generation offers escalating commentary. Round and round they go, until Charles, a sob in his throat, says, "I'm scared." Suddenly, the bickering stops. This pattern—frantic verbal gamesmanship and then a heartbroken cry—repeats throughout the play. Throbbing emotionality becomes the answer to both the drama's "How will this scene find a turning point?" and the characters' "How shall we decide?"

I found this rhythm unflattering for the actors. Betsy Aidem, a theatrical powerhouse, has to deliver too many of her lines with her voice breaking, for example. But at least it plays into one of Harmon's own points: How much weight *should* a person give to a feeling? The Salomon scenes put their thumb on the scale in favor of intuition: the only branches of Marcelle and Patrick's family to survive intact were those which left before the war. Trust yourself, or trust the state? Harmon has done an efficient job of personifying such difficult questions—he is determined to make a theatre of ideas.

Unfortunately, he isn't as interested in character consistency. Elodie says that she is two years into a "manic depressive episode," yet her mother, a psychiatrist, doesn't discuss her daughter's mental health when deciding whether to uproot her. Daniel is interested in Orthodox Judaism, but he never refers to, say, studying the Talmud. And Charles tells Molly that, before they came to France, the Benhamous were in Algeria for five hundred years. Moments later, he talks about his family being constantly on the move:

> This is what the Benhamous do. We just keep crisscrossing the Mediterranean, just back and forth and back and forth until forever. Spain, Algeria, France . . .
>
> Always on the go, always moving, never . . .
> Always wandering . . .
>
> But what can you do? It's the suitcase, or the coffin.

Is it "crisscrossing" if you've made one journey in five hundred years? As propulsive as the play's language can be—the night I saw it, Elodie's bar rant about Americans' obsession with Israel received mid-scene applause—Harmon too often fails to make his characters into anything other than animated position papers. Only in scenes with the incredible Robinette, who gives the self-deluding, hopeful Irma a dozen delicate gradations, does Harmon's work create a beautifully rendered illusion of reality.

Like any play transferring to Broadway from an Off Broadway success, this "Prayer" is a counterproposal to its earlier, smaller, and more intimate iteration. In some practical ways—for instance, the recasting of Patrick with Edwards, whose discomfort with his narrator duties hobbles the play from the start—the competition is weighted toward the Off Broadway version. That production, though, now feels like a relic from another time, before the recent Hamas attacks and the war in Gaza. The play's ideas about the utility of fear sound particularly strange in this changed air. The production itself seems more tentative than it was before: Harmon has removed from the script a final recounting of several hate crimes that will occur after 2016, perhaps so that the audience will not think about other, more recent events. The room in 2022 where I first saw "Prayer" is lost now. The play was built for it, and sometimes you can't go home. ♦

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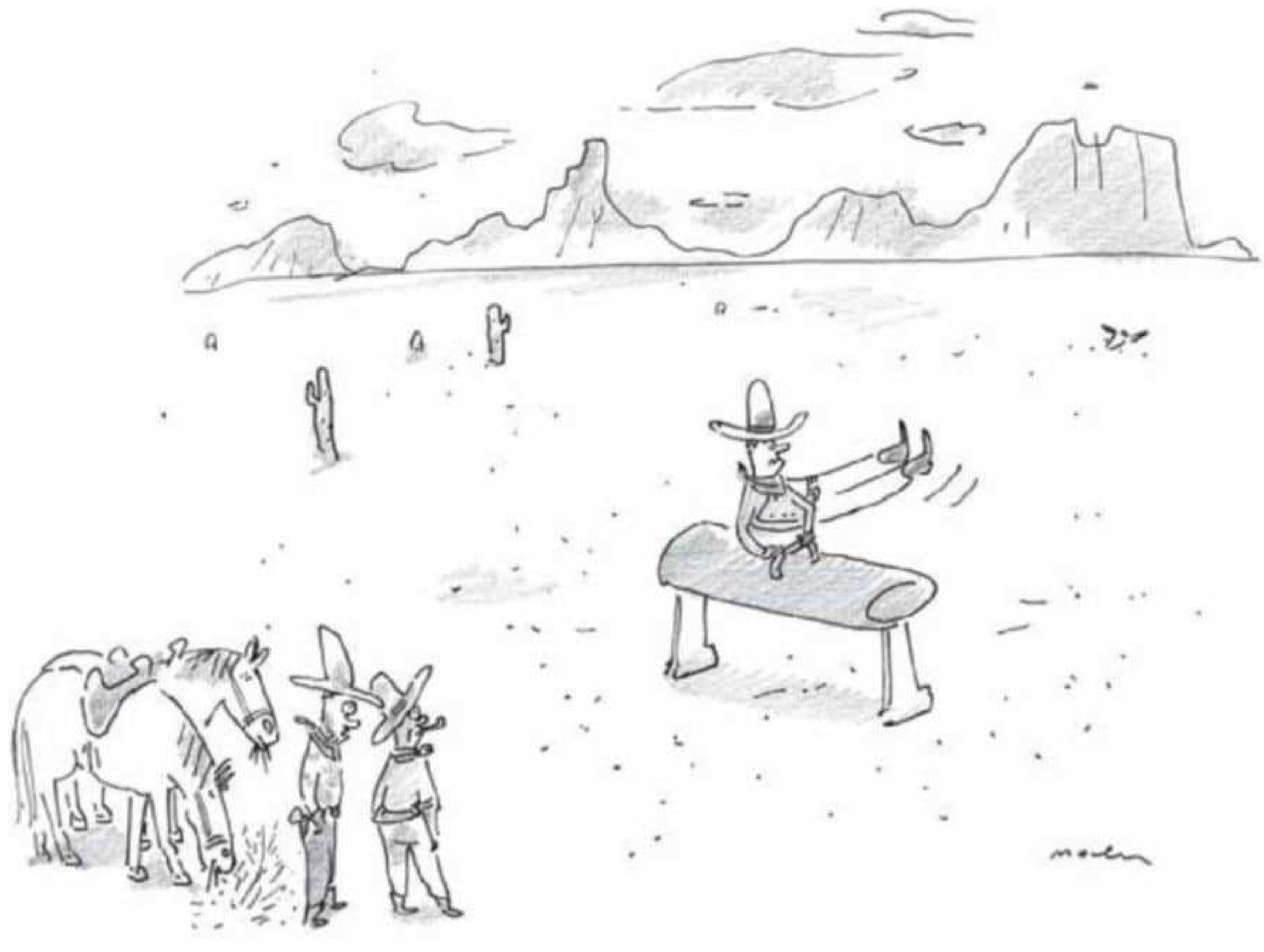
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Michael Maslin, must be received by Sunday, January 21st. The finalists in the January 1st & 8th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 5th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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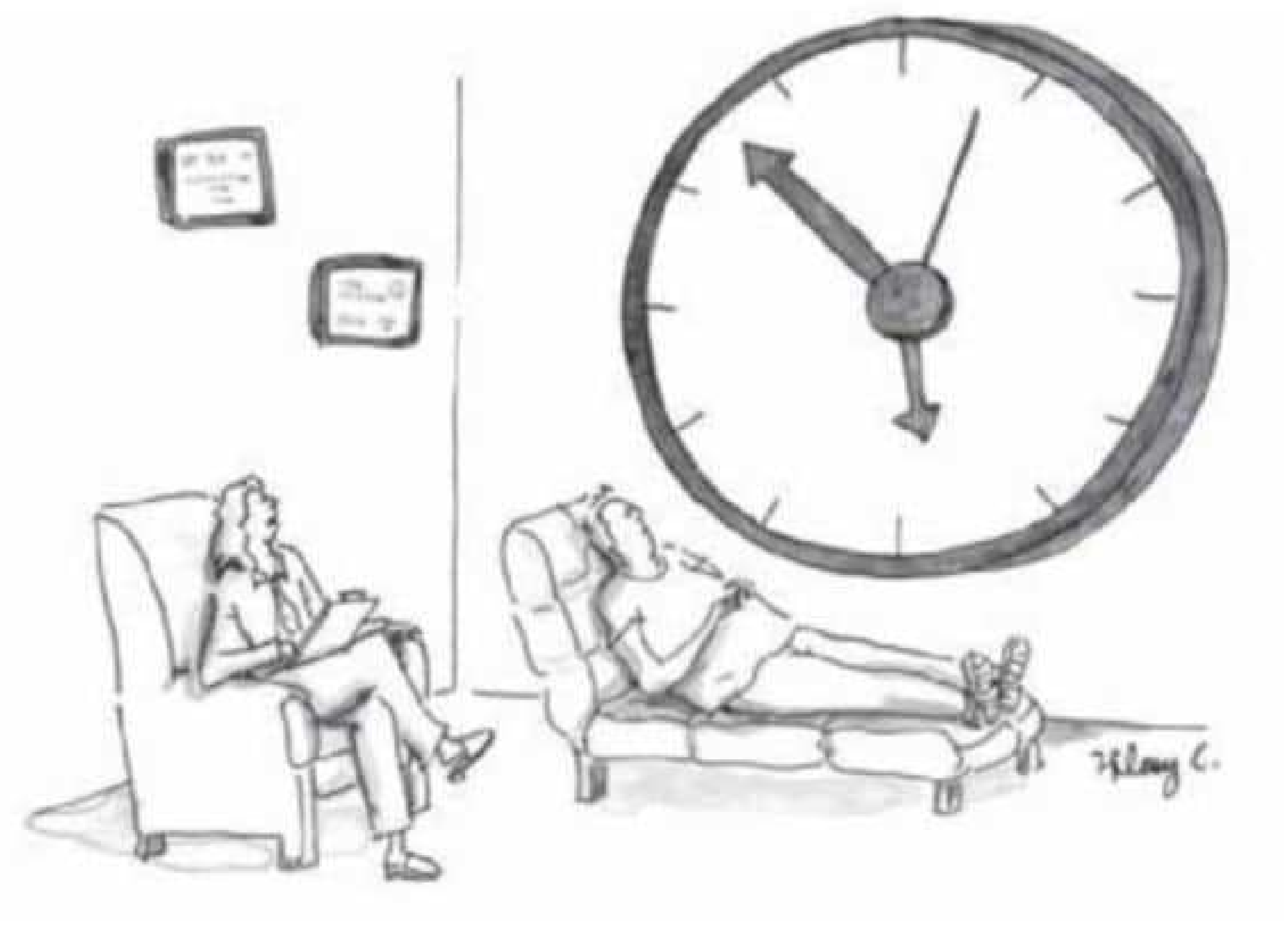
THE FINALISTS

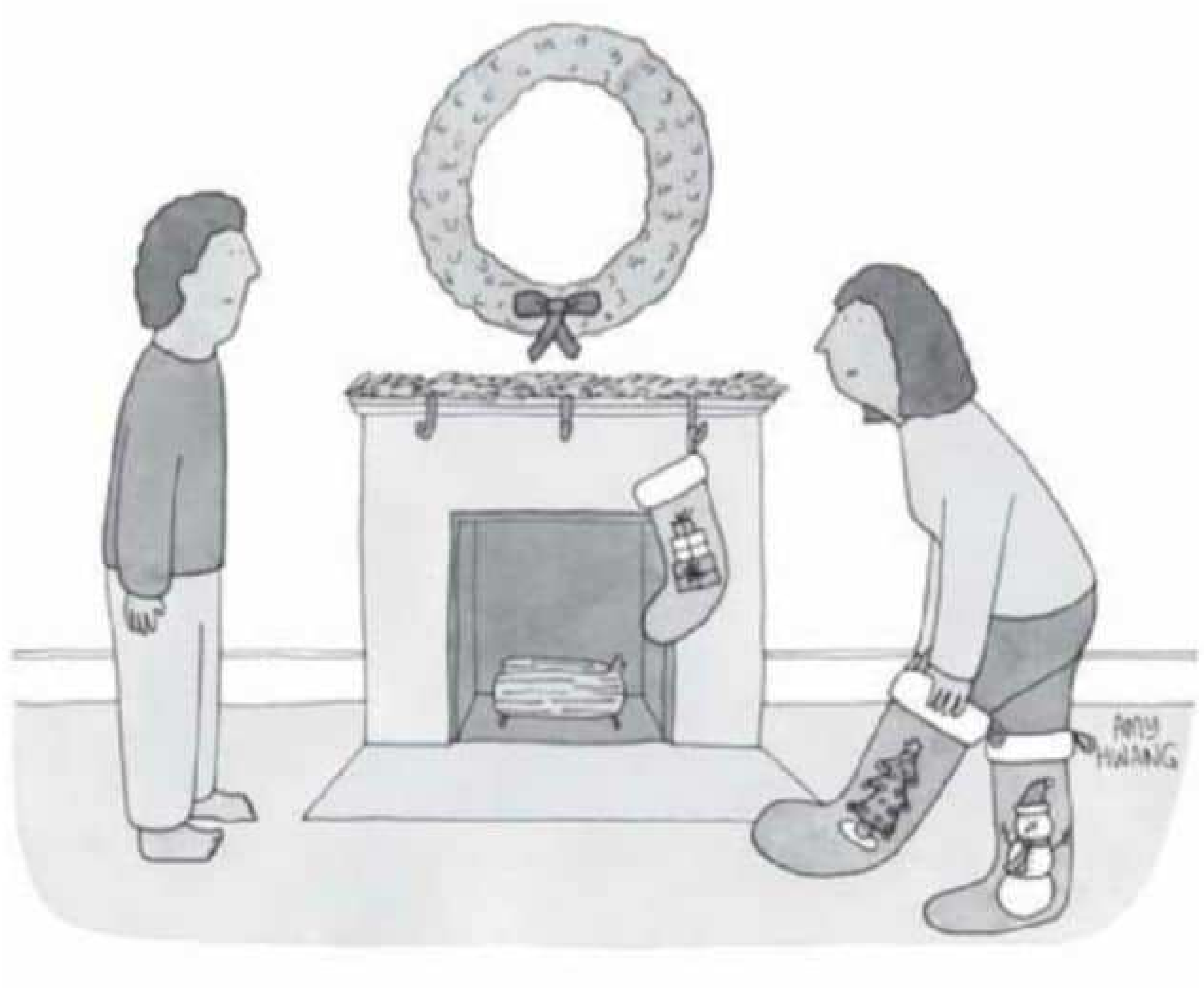


“I don't know. What time do you think it is?”
Margaret Waller, Claremont, Calif.

“So, to summarize, the big hand is your father, the little hand is you, and the second hand is your life going in meaningless circles.”
David Carlson, Cambridge, Mass.

“If you have the money, I have the time.”
Candice Linn, Lakewood, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“But, baby, it's cold inside.”
Jeff Villhauer, North Liberty, Iowa

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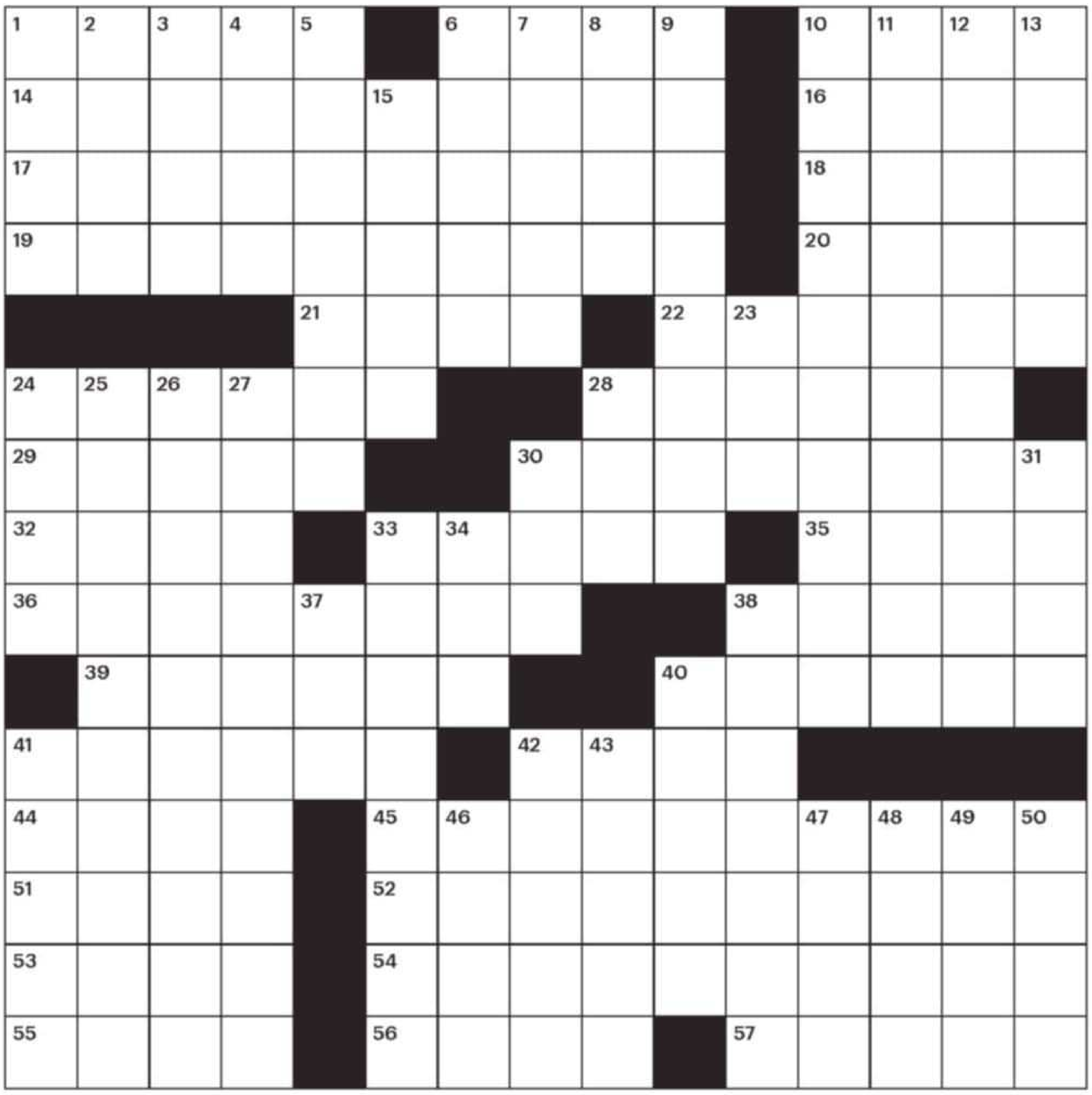
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A lightly challenging puzzle.

BY PATRICK BERRY



ACROSS

1 Sheds feathers
6 Password-protected café offering
10 Swanky
14 "Your work is amazing!"
16 With proficiency
17 1942 film that ends with the line "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship"
18 Lose one's footing, in a way
19 Protagonists who can be tough to root for
20 Choice after picking an entrée
21 Manhattan's ___ Village
22 Rip up
24 Subject of Oedipus' kingdom
28 First reindeer named in "A Visit from St. Nicholas"
29 Like bike chains or pro bodybuilders
30 Collect, as scattered objects
32 Eye rudely
33 Object of a moth's fatal attraction
35 ___ and hearty
36 Decade dominated by the Great Depression
38 "I'm busy right now!"
39 "The Magnificent Seven" actor James
40 Loathe
41 What fan blades do
42 G-rated swear word
44 Little troublemakers
45 Play such as "Tru" or "I Am My Own Wife"
51 Actress Remini who hosted an anti-Scientology docuseries after leaving the religion herself
52 Caribbean cocktail that contains cream of coconut
53 Narrow advantage
54 Snack that uses peanut butter to hold raisins in place
55 Salon options
56 "___ Than Zero" (1985 Bret Easton Ellis novel)
57 Gooey treat at a Scout jamboree

DOWN

1 Shiny mineral that splits into layers
2 Persian Gulf nation with crossed swords on its flag
3 Bringing up the rear
4 Cuisine that includes *tom yum goong* and *pad woon sen*
5 Part of an article in slightly larger text than the body, perhaps
6 Dresses in
7 "Otherwise . . ."
8 Many an emoji
9 Beside oneself
10 Ask for donations from everyone
11 Completely destroy
12 Engineers' tools superseded by calculators
13 Bouncing off the walls
15 Figure out
23 Grill residue
24 Train-whistle sound
25 Witty and sophisticated humor
26 Oscar-nominated actor who stars in "The Umbrella Academy"
27 Keg parties
28 Stop (up)
30 Expense for many suburban commuters
31 Smart-mouthed
33 Iridescent gem with a red-orange tinge
34 Late "Dancing with the Stars" judge Goodman
37 King whose tomb was discovered in 1922, informally
38 Related musicians John, Julian, and Sean
40 Nemesis of Harry, Ron, and Hermione
41 Ticked off
42 Auto damage from a hailstorm
43 Accumulate
46 Start of the workday, for many
47 Harshly criticize
48 Sign of saintliness
49 Trash-can emanation
50 Employee's pay

Solution to the previous puzzle:

P	A	T	H	■	B	E	L	L	E	■	I	D	V	E
O	S	H	A	■	B	L	U	E	P	E	R	I	O	D
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L	A	S	M	E	N	I	N	A	S	■	M	A	L	O
E	T	H	A	N	F	R	O	M	E	■	P	R	A	T
S	T	A	G	E	A	C	T	O	R	■	O	D	D	S
S	A	M	E	■	B	A	S	I	E	■	P	E	S	O

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